Acerca de este libro

Esta es una copia digital de un libro que, durante generaciones, se ha conservado en las estanterías de una biblioteca, hasta que Google ha decidido escanearlo como parte de un proyecto que pretende que sea posible descubrir en línea libros de todo el mundo.

Ha sobrevivido tantos años como para que los derechos de autor hayan expirado y el libro pase a ser de dominio público. El que un libro sea de dominio público significa que nunca ha estado protegido por derechos de autor, o bien que el período legal de estos derechos ya ha expirado. Es posible que una misma obra sea de dominio público en unos países y, sin embargo, no lo sea en otros. Los libros de dominio público son nuestras puertas hacia el pasado, suponen un patrimonio histórico, cultural y de conocimientos que, a menudo, resulta difícil de descubrir.

Todas las anotaciones, marcas y otras señales en los márgenes que estén presentes en el volumen original aparecerán también en este archivo como testimonio del largo viaje que el libro ha recorrido desde el editor hasta la biblioteca y, finalmente, hasta usted.

Normas de uso

Google se enorgullece de poder colaborar con distintas bibliotecas para digitalizar los materiales de dominio público a fin de hacerlos accesibles a todo el mundo. Los libros de dominio público son patrimonio de todos, nosotros somos sus humildes guardianes. No obstante, se trata de un trabajo caro. Por este motivo, y para poder ofrecer este recurso, hemos tomado medidas para evitar que se produzca un abuso por parte de terceros con fines comerciales, y hemos incluido restricciones técnicas sobre las solicitudes automatizadas.

Asimismo, le pedimos que:

+ *Haga un uso exclusivamente no comercial de estos archivos* Hemos diseñado la Búsqueda de libros de Google para el uso de particulares; como tal, le pedimos que utilice estos archivos con fines personales, y no comerciales.

+ *No envíe solicitudes automatizadas* Por favor, no envíe solicitudes automatizadas de ningún tipo al sistema de Google. Si está llevando a cabo una investigación sobre traducción automática, reconocimiento óptico de caracteres u otros campos para los que resulte útil disfrutar de acceso a una gran cantidad de texto, por favor, envíenos un mensaje. Fomentamos el uso de materiales de dominio público con estos propósitos y seguro que podremos ayudarle.

+ *Conserve la atribución* La filigrana de Google que verá en todos los archivos es fundamental para informar a los usuarios sobre este proyecto y ayudarles a encontrar materiales adicionales en la Búsqueda de libros de Google. Por favor, no la elimine.

+ *Manténgase siempre dentro de la legalidad* Sea cual sea el uso que haga de estos materiales, recuerde que es responsable de asegurarse de que todo lo que hace es legal. No dé por sentado que, por el hecho de que una obra se considere de dominio público para los usuarios de los Estados Unidos, lo será también para los usuarios de otros países. La legislación sobre derechos de autor varía de un país a otro, y no podemos facilitar información sobre si está permitido un uso específico de algún libro. Por favor, no suponga que la aparición de un libro en nuestro programa significa que se puede utilizar de igual manera en todo el mundo. La responsabilidad ante la infracción de los derechos de autor puede ser muy grave.

Acerca de la Búsqueda de libros de Google

El objetivo de Google consiste en organizar información procedente de todo el mundo y hacerla accesible y útil de forma universal. El programa de Búsqueda de libros de Google ayuda a los lectores a descubrir los libros de todo el mundo a la vez que ayuda a autores y editores a llegar a nuevas audiencias. Podrá realizar búsquedas en el texto completo de este libro en la web, en la página `http://books.google.com`

This is a reproduction of a library book that was digitized by Google as part of an ongoing effort to preserve the information in books and make it universally accessible.

Google™ books

https://books.google.com

"SISTER"

Digitized by Google

Digitized by Google

2537 e 588

Digitized by Google

"SISTER"

Digitized by Google

By the same Author.

MOLLY MELVILLE. Price 5s.

OLIVE ROSCOE; or, The New Sister. Price 5s.

THE HEIRESS OF WYLMINGTON. Price 5s.

TEMPLE'S TRIAL. Price 5s.

MAUD MELVILLE'S MARRIAGE. Price 3s. 6d.

VERA'S TRUST. Price 3s. 6d.

WINNING THE VICTORY. Price 3s. 6d.

SQUIB AND HIS FRIENDS. Price 2s. 6d.

BIRDIE'S RESOLVE, AND HOW IT WAS ACCOMPLISHED. Price 2s. 6d.

DULCIE'S LITTLE BROTHER; or, Doings at Little Monksholm. Price 2s. 6d.

DULCIE AND TOTTIE; or, The Story of an Old-Fashioned Pair. Price 2s. 6d.

DULCIE'S LOVE STORY. Price 2s. 6d.

FIGHTING THE GOOD FIGHT; or, The Successful Influence of Well Doing. 2s. 6d.

TRUE TO THE LAST; or, My Boyhood's Hero. Price 2s. 6d.

SIR AYLMER'S HEIR. Price 2s.

JOY'S JUBILEE. Price 1s.

LITTLE LOIS. Price 1s.

T. NELSON AND SONS,

London, Edinburgh, and New York.

Digitized by Google

Digitized by Google

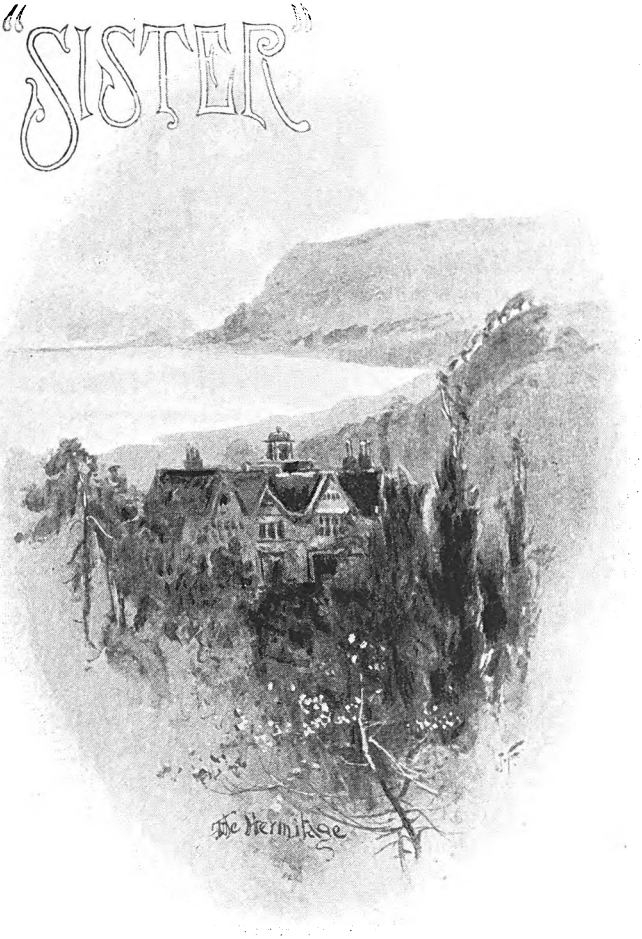
"I laid my cheek against her hand."

Page 172.

Digitized by Google

Digitized by Google

Digitized by Google



T. NELSON AND SONS

London, Edinburgh, and New York.

Digitized by Google

Digitized by Google

"Sister"

A Chronicle of Fair Haven

By

E. EVERETT-GREEN

Author of "Olive Roscoe," "Molly Melville," "Temple's Trial," "The Heiress of Wylmington," &c. &c.

T. NELSON AND SONS

London, Edinburgh, and New York

1898

Digitized by Google

BODLEIAN
13·11·1897
LIBRARY

Digitized by Google

CONTENTS.

I.	OUR HOME AT FAIR HAVEN, ...	9
II.	EAGLE'S CRAG, ...	30
III.	A VOYAGE OF DISCOVERY, ...	51
IV.	NEW FACES, ...	72
V.	A DAY OF DISASTER, ...	93
VI.	"SISTER,"	115
VII.	AUNT JOAN, ...	136
VIII.	CONVALESCENCE, ...	156
IX.	A STORY ON THE SEA, ...	176
X.	AUTUMN DAYS, ...	197
XI.	A HUNTING MORNING, ...	220
XII.	HILDA'S TRIAL, ...	238
XIII.	MY FIRST BALL, ...	258
XIV.	SOMETHING STARTLING, ...	279
XV.	CHRISTMAS, ...	300
XVI.	AUNT JOAN AS AN ALLY, ...	320
XVII.	NEW-YEAR'S EVE, ...	343
XVIII.	"A HAPPY NEW YEAR!"	363
XIX.	SPRING DAYS, ...	381
XX.	THE LAST, ...	402

Digitized by Google

Digitized by Google

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS.

"I LAID MY CHEEK AGAINST HER HAND," .... *Frontispiece*

THE HERMITAGE, ... *Vignette*

"'DO YOU CALL IT A GOOD FACE?'" 44

"ROY'S HAT WAS OFF IN AN INSTANT," 63

"AUNT JOAN ROSE AND GAVE ME A HEARTY KISS OF WELCOME," 139

"I SAW HIM GIVE A GREAT START," 211

"'MAY I HAVE'—COLONEL CLARENCE'S VOICE SUDDENLY STOPPED IN THE MIDDLE OF THE SENTENCE," 292

"SISTER'S HAND WAS ON HIS ARM," 372

Digitized by Google

Digitized by Google

"SISTER."

CHAPTER I.

OUR HOME AT FAIR HAVEN.

"ROY dear, it is perfectly delightful to have you back at home for good again!"

He smiled, and clasped his hands behind his head, looking out seawards with bright, eager eyes, and noting the wild, strong outline of the great headland which bounded our view on the one side, and the sweep of wood and moorland across the mouth of the harbour opposite; and he too looked well pleased.

"It is a good place to live in," he said at length. "Of course I don't want to spend all my days here. I must go out into the world and do something there, some day. But since the Fates have decreed a period of idleness for me just now—well, I can't say I shall make a trouble of it. Fair Haven is a good place to be in, and we will have some rare good times together—just you and I, as we did when we were kiddies, long ago."

Digitized by Google

I clasped my hands together as a flood of reminiscence rushed over me. Since Roy had been so much from home, first at school and then at college, my life had been rather a lonely although always a happy one. I had no sister, and the place was a very quiet one to live in. Even in the holidays I did not always get Roy to myself. Sometimes he brought home a friend with him, and when boys are together girls are voted a bore—though Roy was always tender towards my feelings—and later on, when the friends were Oxford undergraduates, mother had preferred my remaining at home with her when the boys went out fishing or boating. This had seemed to me rather hard, since Roy's Oxford friends were so much nicer to me than his schoolfellows had been. But mother was rather strict with me, in her very gentle way, and I never rebelled against her rule.

But now I was to have Roy for my very own. He had done with Oxford. He had passed a brilliant examination. But the strain had been too much for him. He had been ill for several weeks. It was not till August came that we got him home, and then he came looking very frail and thin and white, although he declared himself "as fit as anything," and laughed at me for wanting to nurse him.

"Aunt Joan gave me nursing enough to last a lifetime!" he would say laughingly. "She's a rare old brick, Aunt Joan. It was awfully good of her to come

Digitized by Google

to me and take me away to her place when I could move, and cocker me up till I could get home. I don't quite know what I should have done without her, and that's a fact."

"I begged and prayed to be allowed to go to you myself, Roy," I said, with something like tears in my eyes; "but mother said it was quite, quite impossible—"

"Of course it was, Cissy—quite impossible. Why, I was four weeks in my rooms in college. Aunt Joan put up at The Mitre, and came backwards and forwards; and old Hawke stayed up with me, and they took care of me together: then Aunt Joan carried us both off to her house for a spell. She could live in Oxford and do things you couldn't. It was awfully good of her. And I was no end glad that she should take a fancy to poor old Hawke too. He's a rattling good fellow, but such an odd fish. But they seemed to hit it off together; and he's there still."

"But it was horrid for us having you so ill—just when we thought you would be coming back covered with glory and renown! And to think that mother couldn't go to you, and that I mightn't! It is horrid sometimes to be a girl, and never allowed to do anything! If I had been old like Aunt Joan, I could have come to you directly."

"Well, that disease will cure itself in time," said Roy, with a laugh. "I wanted you badly enough, Cis; I can tell you that, if it is any satisfaction to you to know.

Digitized by Google

I never was homesick before, since first I went to school. But I was horribly homesick as I lay in my hot little rooms, with my head splitting from morning to night, till I didn't know how to bear the pain. I used just to long and long and long for the lap of the water against the terrace wall here, for the feel of the breeze blowing from Old Tom's head there, for the power to plunge into the cool green waves, and feel them close over my burning head. I used to think that I should be well directly if they would let me go home. It was a great disappointment when I found I was only to go as far as Hurst Royal at first. But here I am at last; and now we will make up for lost time with a vengeance!"

He did not look like any very wild feats of strength even now. He was very, very thin and white, and his eyes looked too large for his face. But to have him back at all, able to sit about on the terrace and chatter to me of his doings at Oxford, or lounge in the boat with the tiller in his hand, whilst I managed the sail, was happiness for me. I had been so long alone, and Roy was so great a part of my life.

How handsome he was, I thought, as I sat opposite to him to-day. He was wonderfully like our delicate invalid mother in feature; and she had been a notable beauty twenty years ago, and was very lovely still. He had a very fine head, and a brow broad and intellectual, with beautiful hazel eyes, and silky brown hair with a crisp wave in it. His colouring was very

Digitized by Google

bright when he was in health, almost like that of a girl; though now his face bore the traces of a serious illness. He was tall and slight, and looked more so than ever just now. But there was always a buoyant, breezy brightness about him which was invigorating, and which made his presence in the house a joy and delight.

"Tell me all the news," he said, as he presently rose; and we sauntered down the long flight of steps to the lowest of the three terraces, against the walls of which lapped the blue water of the harbour. Fair Haven was built upon the mouth of a tidal river, and just behind the promontory on our left lay the little fishing town, hidden entirely from us by the wood-crowned ridge. Opposite lay breezy moorlands and wooded slopes, reflected in the clear waters of the harbour; and away to the right was the open sea, guarded on either side by a magnificent headland—Old Tom and his wife, as the fisher folk called them, though on the map they went by more dignified names. Woods ran down to the sea on both sides of Fair Haven. It was one of the fairest spots in all the land, I think. I had never known a different home, and I had scarcely ever passed more than a few nights away from our sea-girt abode.

Our home itself was a long, low white house, with a pillared portico in front, looking due south over the waters of the harbour. From the house the ground fell away so steeply that our garden was little more than a succession of terraces, the last and lowest of

Digitized by Google

which was also the largest, and was bounded by a low sea-wall, against which the water always lapped, save at very low spring-tides, and over which the spray sometimes dashed in winter storms, although, owing to the shelter of wooded heights above, we never had the sea dashing over into the garden.

This lowest terrace was my favourite place of resort. I had had a little study built there, where I sat for hours, with my books and the dogs for company. There were several great trees growing, which afforded pleasant shade in hot weather; and flowers bloomed brightly in beds the summer through, whilst the borders beneath the towering wall behind were always gay with tall lilies, brilliant phloxes, hollyhocks, dahlias, and rose-bushes of every sort according to season. The climate was so mild that we had flowers of one sort or another almost all the year round; and all up the great terrace walls fruit-trees had been trained, and we had only to stretch out our hands to gather luscious pears, hot yellow plums, or peaches downy and full of juice, according to the season.

Roy's hands were full of plums now as he sat upon the terrace wall, looking down into the gently-lapping water.

"Ah! this is what I used to dream of as I lay in those little stuffy rooms at Oxford. Tell me all the news, Cissy. What has happened to everybody since I went away?"

Digitized by Google

I told him all I could think of, all the little items of news respecting the fisher folk and simple village people with whom we had grown up. It would not be interesting to others, but it interested Roy. He and I had gone about amongst them since we were quite tiny children. Our nurse was a Fair Haven woman, and through her we had come to have an intimate knowledge of the place.

My collie dog came and laid his head against Roy's knee, and wagged his feathery tail gently to and fro in response to the touch of a caressing hand. Chips, Roy's fox-terrier, played an endless game upon the grass with my little red *dachshund*, who combined in amusing fashion the deep solemnity of the hound with the exuberant spirits of puppyhood. Chips and Wuppy (his real pedigree name was Cobus, but he had never been called anything but puppy or Wuppy) had begun to play immediately upon introduction four days ago, and they had hardly ceased since. When absolute exhaustion obliged them to pause, they would take refuge beneath the shade of separate trees, and lie looking at each other with wide-open mouths and lolling tongues. Then after a very short space Wuppy would commence rolling over on his back, uttering extraordinary sounds; or Chips would stand very upright, as if on springs, quivering in every limb; and the next minute there would be a rush and a yap, and the game would be in full swing again.

Digitized by Google

As we talked together, we watched the dogs at their play, often pausing to laugh at their antics and gambols. Poor Monk, who was used to some of Wuppy's attentions, was quite left out in the cold now. Wuppy was one of those dogs who always delight in fresh canine company. Monk was always there. He could play with him whenever he liked, and he ruled the gentle collie with a rod of iron. But Chips was a new importation—new to Wuppy, whom I had only owned for a few months myself. Therefore he appeared to think he must bestow exclusive attention upon him, and as Chips was as full of play as a young monkey, the arrangement appeared to answer very well.

"And how about our friends the Lavenders?" asked Roy, with a twinkle in his eye. "Is Lady Lavender as gushing as ever? And does mother still regard them as the sweetest people in the world?"

"I fancy so," I answered, with a little shrug of the shoulders; "they are always sweet to her. But I don't think anybody could help that, she is so sweet herself. Oh, they are just as usual. I am growing rather fond of Hilda, though. She used to be such a prickly creature one could never get at her. But I think she's really got more in her than any of the rest. Lady Lavender thinks everything of Amy and nothing of Hilda; but I've come to a different conclusion."

"And Nigel and Tom?" queried Roy.

"Tom's not a bad sort of boy; but he's not much at

Digitized by Google

home. Nigel never changes the least. He's a born prig, and I don't think anything will ever get the priggishness out of him."

"He's a good-looking chap too, and clever," said Roy.

"And doesn't he know it too!" I retorted, with the intolerant scorn of youth.

The Lavenders were not only our nearest neighbours, but they were almost the only people in our own rank of life who lived anywhere at all near.

In addition to this, mother and Lady Lavender were both widows, and perhaps it was natural that they should have drawn rather closely together in consequence. Both had children to bring up and property to look after; although our estate was a very small one, as from its position the house could not well command any extensive grounds; and we owned only a small part of the surrounding country, the rest being almost entirely the property of the Lavenders.

Our eldest brother, Garth, of whom I have not yet spoken, because he was with his regiment and away from home, was about the same age as Nigel, the present Lord Lavender, and both were several years older than Roy. Nigel would be thirty next birthday, and Garth was just twenty-nine. Roy was but twenty-two, and I was just one year younger. We had always known the Lavenders very well in one way. They had been our friends and neighbours. I had done lessons with Hilda and Amy, and the boys had gone shooting and boating

Digitized by Google

together in the holidays. But I don't think that either Roy or I had ever cared very much for them. They had too much of what Roy used to call "the flavour of the paragon" about them to please us. And since I had grown out of going there for lessons, and the girls had been taken abroad and to London a good deal, I had seen considerably less of them.

We always stayed at home—at least mother and I did. She had been more or less of an invalid ever since I could remember. So that when the Lavenders took to going away for the London season, for country house visits, and for foreign travel, which happened when Hilda and Amy were both out of the schoolroom, the constant intercourse between us diminished very much. There had been years when I had hardly seen anything of them at all, and they grew in a fashion to be almost like strangers to me.

Latterly, however, they had come back, and talked of settling down at any rate for the autumn and winter. I had begun to see a little more of them since their last arrival, and, as I was telling Roy, I had begun to feel more interest in the elder daughter than I had ever done.

"Amy is engaged," I went on. "Did I tell you in my letters? No? Well, she is. She is to be married next year to a rich man of good family. She fancies herself a good deal about it; but it isn't interesting when one has never seen the creature! I suppose

Digitized by Google

he'll come down in the shooting season and make the acquaintance of the neighbourhood. Amy is looked upon as a success, and Hilda as a failure. I suppose, perhaps, that is why I begin to like Hilda better!"

"She always had lots more in her than Amy."

"Yes; only you couldn't get at it at once. But she begins to be more easy now. I think if I had her down here to myself I could make her talk. She's not pretty and pink and white like Amy, but I call her much more interesting. Amy is nothing but a doll. I like Hilda's face much better; though, when she is in one of her queer moods, she looks very dark and heavy. But when she does brighten up she can look very handsome. I've been quite surprised sometimes."

Roy nodded assent.

"It's often the way with those black-browed, dark-skinned girls. They are ugly ducklings when they are young, and then turn out the beauties of the family. So Amy is engaged, is she? Well, she'll like that very much. Nigel hasn't taken to himself a wife, of course? I should have heard that news if he had. He and Garth seem of one mind in that. They are in no haste to enter into the bonds of matrimony."

"I should think not; it must be much jollier to be free. Garth loves his soldiering, and they say he makes a very good officer. He wrote that perhaps he should be moved to Watchet Bay for the winter. If he is, we shall see lots of him. That would be delightful, would it not?"

Digitized by Google

Roy's eyes brightened. Both he and I were very fond and proud of our elder brother, as we had some cause to be. Garth's career had been a brilliant one. He was in a rather dashing cavalry regiment, and had been a captain for some little time. He was very popular with his men, he was the chosen friend of his colonel, and everybody predicted a successful future for him. He had a rather large private income now, and had the reputation of being generous though wise in his liberality. We at home had reason to feel proud of him, although we saw very much less of him than we should have liked. When his leave came, he was inundated by invitations; and although he always spent some of his time at Fair Haven, yet he could not altogether disregard other claims.

So the idea of having him stationed within a few miles was a very welcome one for us both.

"It would be first-rate," said Roy. "Nothing could be better, just the winter that I shall be at home! We should have first-rate times. There would be all sorts of fun going on if his regiment were at Watchet Bay. Mother has never cared for you to go to the military balls or into that set before; but if Garth were there, it would be quite different."

"Of course it would; mother even said that herself. She said that it was really time I went out a little more. She said perhaps Lady Lavender would act as chaperon; or else she would ask Aunt Joan to come.

Digitized by Google

So I think if you are at home and Garth at Watchet Bay, we shall really have some fun in the winter for a change."

"Oh, we'll have Aunt Joan across!" cried Roy. "I'd much sooner see you under her care than under Lady Lavender's. No, no, Cis; don't make a face over Aunt Joan. You don't know her as I do now. I used to think she was rather queer; but it's a sort of queerness that the world would do better for more of. She's a regular downright brick. You'll find that out for yourself one of these days."

"Well, if you like her, Roy, I suppose I shall," I admitted. "We generally do like the same people. And it was very good of her to go to you at Oxford. But, all the same, I have always had a notion that she is a sort of an ogress. We used to be horribly frightened at her as children, and I have hardly seen her since."

"Ah yes! When she used to be called in of old, it was when mother had spoiled us till we had become unmanageable, and Aunt Joan was requisitioned to get us into order again. But that sort of thing has gone by now. We used to laugh over it together under the trees at Hurst Royal. By-the-bye, Cissy, Aunt Joan has told me that she has made me her heir. She wants me to live after her at Hurst Royal. She said it had been in her mind since the day she stood godmother for me and gave me my name. I had never thought of

Digitized by Google

such a thing; but she has. Of course she isn't old yet, and I should hope she would go on for years and years. But she has made up her mind that I am to come after her some day."

"O Roy, that is nice of her. I shall like her now for being fond of you. Mother always says that Hurst Royal is a beautiful place."

"So it is; and you should see how she rules there! It has taught me a thing or two, I can tell you. And Aunt Joan is an awfully clever woman, too. You should hear old Hawke go on about her. And the library there—it's just a paradise for a bookworm! When Hawke once got inside it he couldn't tear himself away. I believe he sat up till daylight the first night. It was that which made Aunt Joan ask him to stay on whilst I came home. Otherwise I meant to have brought him back with me."

"Oh, I am glad you did not, Roy—not just at first. I want you all to myself; and Mr. Hawke is quite old, isn't he? I mean a good bit older than you—a sort of don?"

"Well, he's just got a fellowship these last months, and I'm awfully glad about it. He really deserves it, for he's a splendid scholar; but he's always been handicapped by his poverty. I don't think anybody knows the self-denial and struggle he went through during his course. Scholarships did a lot; but he had to supplement it by all sorts of shifts. I believe he often

Digitized by Google

went without really sufficient food, because he had hardly money to pay his way sometimes!"

"O Roy!"

"Well, I know I had my suspicions. I used to make him come to my rooms. That was how we began to chum. He helped me no end, and I made him breakfast with me, and coach me. He had other pupils, too; but there are lots of expenses living up there, and prizes and exhibitions don't do everything. However, he's all right now, and he'll be as happy as a king in his quarters in college. Most likely he will be made librarian by-and-by, and then he will have nothing left to wish for."

"That would be rather dull, don't you think?" I said, laughing. "Half the fun of life is in looking forward and making plans about what we should like to do."

"So it is. By the way, if old Garth should suddenly take it into his head to marry and settle down here, we should have to think about our favourite plan of establishing ourselves in the Hermitage over there, and having our own little independent establishment together."

Roy looked across the harbour as he spoke, towards a wooded creek not far from which plied the ferry between the opposite banks of the tidal river, upon the mouth of which Fair Haven was situated.

Over on the other side there were very few houses; but there was just a tiny cluster of cottages near to the ferry, a few scattered farmsteads sprinkled over the

Digitized by Google

downs, a tiny little old Norman church called Holy Cross, with an equally tiny, if not equally ancient, rectory house attached; and to the colony over the water the name of Pinetree Creek had been given, probably from the beautiful growth of pine trees that ran down almost to the water's edge at that place.

There was one other house belonging to that little community, but it was hardly ever occupied. It went by the name of The Hermitage, and it well deserved its *sobriquet.*

The creek ran inland for about a quarter of a mile, and The Hermitage was at its farther end. No other house stood near it. It was quite alone, buried in wood on the land side, and with the water lapping the garden wall upon the other. The house itself lay in a little hollow, and was said to be hopelessly damp. The garden had long been a tangled wilderness. In our mild climate vegetation grew luxuriantly, and the flowering shrubs were a sight to behold in the spring and early summer. The garden of The Hermitage was a paradise of beauty at some seasons of the year; but with the fall of the leaf it became dank and dreary to a terrible extent, and no tenant had ever been found willing to remain a second winter there.

But Roy and I love the place. It had fascinated us from our childhood. It seemed a sort of "no man's land," where we could do anything we chose, and live free from all control or observation. Often and often had

Digitized by Google

we taken the boat across and spent the whole day playing in the wild, unkept garden. We knew of a way by which the empty house might be entered, and to us it was our castle and fortress, where we played delightful games, and brought our secret treasures. We always declared that when we were grown up we would come here and live, whilst Garth and his wife (we used always to presuppose that Garth would marry in time) would live at Wyverne Court and take care of mother.

Wyverne Court belonged to Garth now, but mother had the right to live there during her lifetime; and I am sure that nobody Garth would have thought of marrying would wish to turn her away. Mother and Aunt Joan had been co-heiresses of the wealth of the Royals. Aunt Joan had the family property and a handsome income, and mother had a very large fortune, I believe. Perhaps that was the reason why both Roy and I came into a small income on attaining our majority. Father had arranged it so. He made Roy and me equal; and, though it was nothing very grand in the way of wealth, we always declared, and with truth, that it would keep us (with our dogs, and even a horse or two) in comfortable affluence in such a small and unpretentious place as The Hermitage.

We had not spoken of this childish dream for some years, I think—Roy having been taken up with college life, and Garth showing no disposition to make Wyverne Court his home. Now, when I saw him look over the

Digitized by Google

water towards the thick group of pines, I cried out suddenly,—

"O Roy—I never told you! I kept it till you should be back again. The Hermitage is let at last!"

"Let, is it? No, you never told me that. Well, I daresay it will be empty again before we want it."

"I daresay. Nobody stays. I don't suppose Miss Lucas will either. She's evidently queer."

"Miss Lucas? An old maid, eh? What's she like? and how long has she been there?"

"She came about Christmas, they say; but we never heard a word about it till quite a long time afterwards. It's a mercy you didn't come home at Easter, or we might have gone prowling about her garden without a notion that anybody was there. Nobody knows her. Nobody calls. Old Mr. Phillimore pays a duty visit, people say, about once in two months; but everybody else fights shy."

"Why?"

"Well, I suppose, because nobody knew at first. You know what The Hermitage is like. A dozen tenants might come and go, and if they chose to live like anchorites, we should be none the wiser. She draws supplies from Stark Ho, not from here or Watchet Bay, just as though she wanted not to be noticed or called upon. Not a creature knew of her existence till quite the spring; and then, as nobody knew anything about

Digitized by Google

her, nobody called. I think everybody is rather afraid of her."

"Criminal in hiding, or lunatic in retirement?" suggested Roy, with a laugh.

"Well, perhaps. Anyhow it seems queer, and she has never been seen outside her own grounds, except on Sunday, when she goes to Holy Cross Church, where, of course, nobody from this side goes. I've never seen her crossing the ferry, and I don't much think she's ever been over to Fair Haven. It seems altogether queer; and as Lady Lavender says to mother, 'It is impossible for us to take notice of a person who hides away like that. Most likely she has only too good a reason for doing so. It would be impossible to call without knowing more, and there appears to be no way of obtaining information.'"

Roy laughed; for I had half-unconsciously mimicked Lady Lavender's slow and slightly-mincing tones, and we had always made rather a jest of Lady Lavender from our childhood upward.

"Poor old thing! it seems rather a shame though."

"What does?"

"Why, to leave her out in the cold, and for nobody to go near her. It can't be very lively at The Hermitage, with never a soul to speak to from year's end to year's end. I never can see what it matters about who people are and where they come from. I go by what they are themselves."

Digitized by Google

"Yes; but nobody knows Miss Lucas."

"Of course they don't, if they don't call. But they could if they wanted to."

"People say she doesn't want to be called on. Mr. Phillimore seems to have given that out. I think that is what partly put everybody off."

"Well, it's very bad for anybody to be cut off from the rest of their kind," said Roy stoutly. "I declare one of these days I'll take the boat across, and go and call upon the poor old thing myself!"

"O Roy, what fun! And you'll take me with you if you do?"

"Well, we'll see. What would the little mother say to that?"

"I don't know. I wish I were a boy. Boys can do such lots of things. Girls do have such a dull time."

"Never mind; you shan't have a dull time now, I promise you. Here am I at home for quite a spell; and we'll have old Hawke here soon to poke fun at. And I daresay Aunt Joan will come across one of these days; I almost made her promise to. And if Garth's regiment gets sent to Watchet Bay, you'll soon see how we'll brisk up! To say nothing of getting a rise out of this poor old lady, boxed up alone at The Hermitage!"

Roy was always a delightful boy for planning nice things, and when he was at home even quiet every-day pleasures had a different savour. He enjoyed things so heartily, and he was so full of fun and buoyancy, that

Digitized by Google

his spirits were infectious, and I was perfectly happy in his company.

"Those dogs will have an apoplectic fit before long if something isn't done for them," remarked Roy with a laugh, looking at the two panting, exhausted creatures, eyeing each other from beneath the shelter of their respective trees. "Let's take the boat and pull about the bay a bit, and take the dogs with us. They can't play the fool all the time there, and we'll heave them overboard later on and give them a swim. They must want a bath after all that exertion."

Digitized by Google

CHAPTER II.

EAGLE'S CRAG.

ROY was a great favourite with the Lavenders. I think he was a favourite everywhere. One of his first visits must, of course, be to Eagle's Crag. And upon the following afternoon, as soon as it was cool enough, we started forth together to climb up to the great castellated house, perched in a splendid position on the rocky promontory, of which Old Tom was the culminating point.

Eagle's Crag was a much finer place than Wyverne Court; yet, to my thinking, our home was far the pleasanter place to live in.

We were sheltered by the hill behind from the cold winds that blow even down there in the south. We were shut off from north and east, and lay open to the warm south sun. Our garden was bright with flowers almost the whole year round. Our trees grew slim and straight, instead of taking that wind-swept angle which they did upon the higher ground. We could walk and even sit out upon our terrace every sunny day in the

Digitized by Google

year. But at Eagle's Crag the wild winds came sweeping across from every direction. The garden was always a fortnight behind ours, and they would often be shivering by the fire when we were basking in the sun.

Notwithstanding that it was a very fine place, and stood most commandingly. It had magnificent views on all sides but one of the sea-coast, tossing waves, and beetling crags; whilst the front, which looked inland, commanded a beautiful view of green down and wooded heights.

Lord Lavender's property was extensive, and Nigel had remained at home to look after it ever since his father's death. I suppose it was really very right of him to do so, for his mother took no special interest in anything beyond her social duties and pleasures, and had been of late years much away, as I have already said. Nigel was backwards and forwards, but was more often at Eagle's Crag than anywhere else. We did not, however, see very much of him in the absence of his family, as was perhaps natural. I could not go up there to call on him, and there was often no brother at home, so that his calls were few and far between.

Sometimes the Lavenders made a considerable feature in my life, and then again they would disappear, and I should see hardly anything of them.

But now they were at home, and Roy was at home

Digitized by Google

too. We were certain to see much of each other during the coming months. We had a little gay season of our own at Fair Haven in the summer months, and Lady Lavender, when she got back from a lengthy absence, always felt it her duty to show hospitality to the neighbourhood.

It was not far from our house to Eagle's Crag, if we took the steep path up the heights. The carriage road was much longer, and wound up towards it in a zigzag. Roy, however, despised the idea of driving, so we walked leisurely, often pausing to sit upon the low wall or upon a friendly tree-trunk, and look over the harbour lying blue beneath us, and across at the widening horizon of the great sea beyond.

It was a beautiful evening, and the light was growing mellow and golden with the approach of sunset. Roy often exclaimed at the beauty of all around him. He was passionately fond of his home, the sea, the rocks, and the free open-air life. That was perhaps why we had spoken so often of setting up for ourselves close to Fair Haven. I don't think either of us could picture a life lived away from it.

"We can see The Hermitage from here," Roy observed at one point, pausing and gazing across the harbour to the pine groves on the opposite shore.

From that particular point one could see the shut-in little house better than from any other. Indeed it was the only spot from which anything like a bird's-eye

Digitized by Google

view could be obtained, and that was a very distant one.

Roy and I had both strong, keen sight, and we had trained our eyes by constant exercise. We both saw very plainly that there had come a change over the house. Its windows stood open to the air. They shone brightly where the sun touched the glass. There were white draperies fluttering in them. The forlorn, deserted aspect of the house had changed to something more home-like. The gardens had been trimmed, and the lawns looked as though they had been mown. The brightness of the greensward told us that they must have been tended this summer. Patches of colour showed also that the beds had been planted with summer flowers. The place wore the sort of appearance I had often pictured to myself when Roy and I had sat looking at it, planning how we would one day make it our home.

"I hope Miss Lucas won't take it into her head to stay there too long," I remarked. "It is just the place for you and me, Roy; we never counted upon its being snapped up by a stranger. I don't call it quite fair!"

"Well, when the time comes, if she won't go by fair means we can try foul ones," answered Roy, with his infectious laugh. "I never knew anybody stay more than a year and a half at The Hermitage, and I don't think we shall want it before then."

Digitized by Google

"Perhaps not, but I don't think I like anybody else to have it," I answered unreasonably. "I used to like to think it was there, just waiting for us."

"I daresay it will be waiting for us again before we want it very badly," Roy replied. "And the landlord may have done a few things for this tenant that we shall find handy ourselves."

We pursued our way upwards, and now were very nearly at our journey's end. The cliff path wound round the house just below the platform upon which it was built, and landed you in the great courtyard into which the carriages drove. But there was another way, up some steps cut in the rock, by which you could reach the terrace on the south-west front, upon which the main rooms inhabited by the family opened. This was the way by which we had always come and gone since childhood. We mounted without hesitation, emerging upon the great plateau, and immediately hearing ourselves eagerly hailed from close at hand.

"Roy, old fellow! Is it really you? This is something like. Why, we thought you'd pay your first visit in the carriage; we heard you had been awfully bad! Come along and see the others; they're all out here having tea.—Cissy, we've all been abusing you roundly for not coming near us. I suppose you've been so wrapped up in Roy that you've had no thoughts for anything or anybody else."

It was exactly the state of the case, so I laughed

Digitized by Google

without answering. Tom Lavender was a nice lad, just through Eton, and going off soon for a spell of travel before passing on to Cambridge. He and I were decided "chums" when he was at home. He used to come and fish in the harbour a good deal, and take his meals with us. Just lately he had been away on a visit to some school friend, so we had not met as often as was usual in the holidays. Tom was not clever like Nigel; but I liked him a good deal better in those days. I was always free and unfettered with him; but with Nigel it was different, and I rather resented the situation.

Nobody had ever said a word to me, not even Roy; and yet I knew quite well that both mother and Lady Lavender hoped that Nigel and I should marry each other some day. I can't tell how it was that I knew this. But I did know it, and latterly it had made me feel restless and uncomfortable in Nigel's presence, and inclined to shun him and to say rather spiteful things of and to him, some of which, perhaps, were hardly deserved.

To-day, however, I had forgotten everything unpleasant. I had Roy at home again, and everything else seemed to fade into insignificance. Our anxiety about Roy for a few weeks had been enough to make this restoration to health and spirits come with a wonderful sense of delight and happiness.

There was quite a little stir and ovation when we

Digitized by Google

appeared. Roy was a great favourite with our friends. He was received with open arms, given a seat in the shade by Lady Lavender herself, and quite inundated by questions about himself, how he was, and what he had been doing to get so ill, and what he would be fit for in the summer weeks that were still left to us.

Roy hated talking about himself, but he never got cross. He could laugh things off and be nice to everybody—even to Lady Lavender, whom I often found terribly irritating.

She was a very fine-looking woman, and many people admired her very much; but there was a touch of affectation in her manner, which to my thinking spoiled her terribly. She also looked rather made up and artificial in her dress, at any rate in our eyes. I don't mean that she painted or powdered. I do not think she did; but she was always "got up," as Roy called it, with great elaboration. She had a great deal of deportment, if that is the right word; some people called it swagger, but perhaps that is too strong a term. I never felt quite at ease with her, and the greater the demonstrations of affection that she proffered, the more I used to feel inclined to shrivel up into myself. I was always glad when she talked to somebody else rather than to me. It was a relief to-day to see her place Roy beside her in the comfortable chair Nigel had been occupying. I could breathe more freely farther off, and I was curious to ask about Amy's engagement,

Digitized by Google

and about a lot of things which girls like to talk over together.

Hilda and Amy were not in the least like sisters. It was difficult to believe them to be so nearly related. Amy was very pretty indeed. I used to like to sit and look at her. She had quite perfect features, and blue eyes like those of a lovely wax doll. Her complexion was also like that of a wax doll, and her mouth, with its little perpetual smile, added to the resemblance. I should have loved to have Amy for a doll, to pet and nurse and dandle, if only she had been the right size! She was never out of temper, never cross or petulant. Perhaps she was not very interesting, but she was very lovable; and though sometimes I used to tell her I should like to shake her and put her in a rage, it was rather nice to have somebody upon whose amiability one could always depend.

Hilda was quite, quite different. She had been a rather unattractive, heavy child, black-haired, black-browed, with large dark eyes, almost too large for her face, and a complexion that verged upon the sallow. Her features, too, had been too pronounced for beauty, although they were regular and well moulded. Lady Lavender had been rather troubled about Hilda's appearance in the old days; but she was growing into a much more handsome woman than had been hoped in the days of her mere girlhood. She was twenty-four now, and when she was interested and animated, she looked

Digitized by Google

really quite handsome. But she had not married, had not even had a single offer, and in that sense of the word she had been a decided failure.

Perhaps it was the consciousness of her mother's disappointment in her that had helped to make Hilda a failure. She had grown reserved to the verge of sullenness, and although a clever and well-read girl, had such a horror of appearing to pose as a learned woman, that she often gave the impression of being rather stupid. But she was growing out of these girlish angularities of disposition now, and I had observed during these last weeks that she had grown decidedly more attractive than she had ever let herself appear. I had always looked up to her, and had found her more interesting than Amy. I was beginning to think that, if she would let me, I could make a friend of her.

Nigel I find it more difficult to describe. I used to be fond of calling him a prig in those days; but I will not say I may not have done him some injustice in so ticketing him.

Nigel was a very tall, slightly-built man of nine-and-twenty. He had a curious face, rather long, with the clearly-cut features of his family, and a very wide forehead, almost too wide for the lower part of his face. His eyes were set rather far apart, too, and were of a peculiar grey colour, pencilled with black. Their lids were rather heavy, which gave to him sometimes a sleepy expression, and one was rather apt to think he

Digitized by Google

was not listening to what passed, till some pertinent remark or criticism showed the contrary to be the case. In manner he had a little of his mother's precision of speech, and he spoke rather slowly. Perhaps it was this small inherited mannerism which made me dub him prig, or perhaps it was because he always appeared to have something to say upon every subject brought up. Not that he was a great talker. Rather the reverse. But if he was appealed to, he always had information to bestow; and I used to feel a little irritation at times in finding him so well informed. If I had been airing some rather crude opinions on a subject about which I had been reading, and about which I fancied the Lavenders would know nothing, I was not best pleased to have the wind taken out of my sails a little later on by the discovery that Nigel knew all about it, ten times as much as I, and that I had been talking nonsense (in his opinion) a great part of the time.

I used to fret under this sort of thing, and revenge myself by calling him the Admirable Crichton, or a walking encyclopædia, or "Lord High Everything," and I never felt at home with him, as I did with Tom and the girls, although it would be stating matters too broadly to say that I disliked him.

It was partly the little family agreement, or desire respecting us, that made me disposed to be captious where Nigel was concerned. I suppose nothing is more

Digitized by Google

fatal to the success of such a scheme than for the parties themselves to have an inkling about it. It turned me completely against Nigel, and almost made me dislike him; and I used to fancy he reciprocated the feeling, which naturally did not tend to put me at ease in his presence. My great desire in those days was for him to get married. If he would only bring home a wife to Eagle's Crag, then I felt that I might learn to like both him and her. I thought he would be sure to marry somebody nice, for he was particular to the verge of fastidiousness. His sisters often complained that he interfered with their liberties—Hilda in particular. But mother was always very fond of Nigel, and when he came to our house, I used to leave them together to their talks, quite sure that they would enjoy them more without me.

Just now I was not thinking about him at all. I had heard only a very little about Amy's engagement, and I was anxious to learn more. I had never known an engaged girl as yet, and thought it all rather interesting and fascinating. I saw the sparkle of diamonds on Amy's finger, and felt that I had a great many questions to ask.

"What is his name?" I asked of Amy at last, when we had finished drinking our tea, and had broken up our party into little groups. "I suppose you told me, but I have forgotten. What is his name, and what is he like?"

Digitized by Google

"His name is Edward Clarence," she answered. "If you like to come indoors with me, I will show you his photograph, and some of the things he has given me."

Of course I was delighted to follow her to her dainty little room—though I ought not to call it little; for it was large enough to be turned into a joint bed and sitting room, but in comparison with some of the fine rooms at Eagle's Crag it was small. Amy's nest was always exquisitely pretty and luxuriant in its plenishings. She had quantities of pretty things, and kept them all in beautiful order about her. She led me up to a little table, on which stood, in the place of honour, a framed photograph. I knew without any telling that this was what we had come to see, and I looked at the face long and earnestly.

It was a very handsome head; there was no doubt about that. The features were good, the pose of the head was good; the portrait was a striking and notable one. One would have guessed the man to be a soldier. His moustache, his general appearance, had a military flavour. I asked the question at once, but Amy shook her head smilingly.

"No, he has never been in the army; but you are quite right. He does look like an officer. Do you think he is handsome?"

"Of course I do. He is very handsome. Is he tall?"

Digitized by Google

"Yes, quite tall enough. Five foot ten. Almost as tall as Nigel. I don't care for giants."

"He is a good bit older than you are, isn't he, Amy?"

"Yes, a good deal; but I don't mind that. He is forty, and I'm only twenty-two; but he doesn't look old a bit."

"Does Nigel like him?" I asked.

I don't quite know why I put the question. Perhaps it was because I had some latent respect for Nigel's powers of discernment of which I was hardly aware myself. It brought a little cloud to Amy's brow. She asked rather plaintively,—

"Why do you ask about Nigel?"

"I don't know," I answered truthfully; "is there any reason why I shouldn't?"

"Not exactly; but the tiresome thing is that Nigel is the only person in the world who doesn't seem to like Edward. I think it's very unkind of him, because he doesn't know a thing against him; and yet he didn't want mamma to consent to the engagement."

"But she did?"

"Oh yes. Mamma thinks a good deal of Nigel's opinion, but she could not take it when he had nothing whatever to say, except that there was too much difference in age. If I don't mind that, it's no business of anybody else. It didn't stop it, but it made things a little uncomfortable."

Digitized by Google

"Do you mean that Nigel is nasty about it?" I asked, with the directness of girlhood.

"Not exactly," answered Amy; "but one always has a feeling that he doesn't quite like it, and I don't like people to be against me." Amy's smiling lips drooped at the corners, like those of a child who is going to cry. "Of course this place is Nigel's, and he is the head of the family. It is very hard he should take against Edward like that. He doesn't show it exactly, and he has asked him here. But one feels it all the same. I like people to be nice to me."

"Perhaps he will get nice when he knows Mr. Clarence better."

"I hope he will. But Nigel is dreadfully stubborn when once he gets an idea into his head."

I was looking at the pictured face on the table, whilst Amy turned over her trinkets, and displayed her lover's many gifts.

"Is he rich?" I asked, as I looked at the costly trifles.

"Yes, quite nicely rich—not a millionaire; but he has the family property, and quite enough money for us to be comfortable. He is of very good family, which mamma cares almost more about. And he has hardly any relations, which I think I am rather glad of. He has no brothers, and only one sister, married and out in India; and he has a cousin, Colonel Clarence, in the army—"

Digitized by Google

"Colonel Clarence!" I interrupted quickly. "Why, that is the name of Garth's colonel, whom he is so fond of. Is this colonel in the Lancers too?"

"Why, yes—I had forgotten that Garth was in the same regiment. Of course it must be the same. Did you say that Garth and he were great friends?"

"Yes; Garth mentions him very often in his letters. Of course Colonel Clarence is much older than he; but they seem to be a good deal together. And Garth thinks that they will soon be stationed at Watchet Bay, and so we shall see a great deal of them, and have quite a gay season."

Amy's eyes brightened with interest and anticipation. Hilda had by this time come in, and was standing beside me, looking at the photograph on the table.

"Do you like it?" she asked me, as Amy turned away to lock up her treasures once more.

"I think he is very handsome," I answered, with a glance at her face; "don't you?"

"Yes," answered Hilda at once; and then, as Amy moved into the little turreted dressing-room in search of something else she wanted to show me, Hilda asked in a low voice,—

"Do you call it a good face?"

I was rather surprised at this question coming from the reserved Hilda, and also to note a certain line of anxiety between her brows. She did not look cross or heavy, as in the days of old, but there was an expression

Digitized by Google

Digitized by Google

Digitized by Google

on her face which seemed to me to denote concern. Girl-like, I answered her question by another,—

"Don't you?"

"I don't know. Besides, what I mean hardly shows in the photograph. They have smoothed away the lines; but when you see him you will perhaps understand what I mean. He is very good-looking, he seems very nice, and has charming manners, and all that; but sometimes I see a look in his eyes, sometimes there come lines into his face, and then I have a curious feeling all down my spine. I feel as though I would sooner walk into a lion's den than marry a man with such a face!"

"O Hilda!"

"Of course it may be all nonsense. I know very little about men. You know I have never cared for them, nor they for me. Amy ought to know much better; but that's how I feel sometimes."

"Is that what Nigel feels?" I asked in a cautious tone.

Hilda put her hand on my arm, and we turned away from the room together. Amy had become engrossed over something in the turret beyond, and seemed to forget all about us. Hilda took me on to her room, which had a wide balcony with a roof to it, overlooking the sea. In the summer months chairs always stood there, and a few skin rugs were laid down. She herself spent much of her time out here.

Digitized by Google

I used to call it her eyrie, and a very pleasant one it was.

"Amy told you about Nigel, then?"

"Yes; but I don't think she knows why he objects."

"I don't think any of us does. He has said very little. I don't think he knows a single thing against Mr. Clarence; but he has an intuition that he is not a good man. At least that is what I believe."

"And you feel the same?"

"Rather. I don't know how to say it, but I sometimes feel just as I have said. But then Amy and I are so different; and mother likes him immensely—they just suit each other."

"Did you know that his cousin is Garth's colonel, and that most likely they are soon coming to Watchet Bay?"

Hilda looked suddenly interested and aroused.

"Do you mean that Colonel Clarence is commanding the regiment Garth is in, and that they are coming here?"

"Most likely. Garth said it was probably their next move. Isn't Colonel Clarence Amy's Mr. Clarence's cousin?"

"Yes," answered Hilda slowly—"almost the only relation he has. He talks about him often."

"Then he will like him to be here if he comes on a visit to you?"

"I don't know," answered Hilda slowly, "I don't feel at all sure about that."

Digitized by Google

I saw there was something moving in Hilda's mind, and I waited for her to speak, looking inquiringly at her, but not asking any verbal question. Presently she went on speaking.

"It's a curious thing, but do you know that it is invariably when Mr. Clarence—Edward I suppose I ought to call him—is speaking about his cousin, the cavalry colonel, that I notice the ugly look in his eyes and on his face which makes me feel that I would sooner die than marry him!"

"O Hilda, tell me what he looks like."

"I don't know if I can; it is so difficult to explain in words. But I have often seen it come. A sort of dark, evil look, it comes suddenly into his eyes, and then there come lines into his face, and if you will not be shocked at the expression, I just feel as though a devil was looking out from it. The look passes away again very quickly; but I have seen it too often to be mistaken, and I have noticed that it is generally talking about Colonel Clarence that brings it there. Once when mother spoke of asking him to meet Edward here in the autumn, I saw it most strongly; also when Amy has been asking him if his cousin will be best man when they are married, and so forth. He always speaks as though they were very friendly to each other, but he looks—well, like what I said just now."

"O Hilda!"

Digitized by Google

I could not think of anything else to say. It seemed suddenly as though something like a real live romance were unfolding before my eyes. I had read of loves and hates, betrothals and deadly feuds, in the pages of novels and story books; but I had never come across anything of the sort in my own experience, so I was at once keenly interested.

"Don't talk about this to anybody," said Hilda suddenly. "You know it may only be my fancy."

"Of course I shan't—at least only to Roy, and you won't mind him, I know; he's quite safe."

"Oh, Roy would never make mischief; but it doesn't do to talk. One finds that out as one grows older. Mischief is so easily made. And Amy would never forgive me if she thought I was setting people against Edward. And indeed I don't mean to do that. He is very nice in lots of ways. I always liked him till after we saw so much of him; and it may be all my fancy. Amy ought to know better; and she thinks everything of him."

"She is really in love?"

"Oh yes—over head and ears! I can't quite understand it. I don't think I'm made like other women. I have never felt the least bit like that, and I don't think I ever shall!"

"Nor I," I answered confidently. "I used to think it was all make up, and that there wasn't anything like it really. But I suppose there is."

Digitized by Google

"Oh yes, there is, and it makes people rather tiresome, I think. But they seem to like it; and if everything goes right, I daresay it is very nice and pleasant. But sometimes one wonders what ever would happen if things went wrong. That's why I can't help worrying sometimes about Amy. And I believe Nigel feels just the same. If Mr. Clarence—Edward—were to turn out, well, different from what she thinks, why, I believe it would break her heart."

"Oh," I answered, drawing a long breath, "but he won't surely. Is he as much in love with her as she with him?"

"I don't know; I wish I did. I don't see why he wants to marry her if he isn't. There are heaps and heaps of pretty girls, and rich girls besides. And he is quite a catch in a small way. I suppose he cares for her, or he wouldn't have chosen her; but whether he cares in the same way, I don't know. I don't understand men, as I said before."

We could not talk on any longer—we had to go and join the rest—but I thought a great deal about Hilda's words as we sat chatting on the terrace. Lady Lavender was very gracious, and spoke of the engagement in a manner which showed how much pleased she was about it. She told us that Edward was soon coming on a visit; and when I spoke of Colonel Clarence, and said that his regiment was likely to be in the neighbourhood soon, she grew quite excited (for her),

Digitized by Google

and asked a number of questions, and took the greatest interest in our answers.

"It will be such a pleasure for Edward having his cousin so near; will it not, Amy?" she said. "He speaks so often of Colonel Clarence. I think they were brought up together almost like brothers. I am sure that they are very much attached."

Amy smiled and blushed, and said it would be delightful. It was quite plain that no shadow of doubt or misgiving had entered into her pretty head.

Digitized by Google

CHAPTER III.

A VOYAGE OF DISCOVERY.

"LET'S take the boat and go and prospect about," said Roy. "I've hardly been on the water yet, and it's a first-rate day for a sail. We'll run down and have a look at Old Tom and his wife at close quarters, and then back up the harbour, perhaps to Queensbridge. I want to see everything again. Will you come, Cissy?"

"Of course I will. I get almost no sailing when you are away, Roy. Mother is nervous when I take the boat alone, if I go any distance; and unless old Wallace can come with me, I don't care to go. Let's take the *Sea-gull*, and pack up our lunch and not come back till evening. Mother won't mind; and it's going to be a splendid day."

Mother always liked us to have good times in Roy's holidays. It had been so from my childhood. I was kept rather close at home when no brother was available; but when either Garth or Roy undertook the care of me, I was always permitted a glorious liberty. She

Digitized by Google

made us quite free now to stay out as long as we liked. Lady Lavender had promised to come and see her in the afternoon, and she was always happy and busy with her books and letters and bits of dainty fancy work.

I wish I could describe mother, she was so very lovely and so young-looking, in spite of her frail health and widow's dress. She did not wear weeds any longer, but always dressed in black, with a good deal of soft white tulle or lace about her head and shoulders. She would have made a lovely picture, I think, with her soft brown hair, just beginning to silver over, her fair, sweet face with the flitting colour, and the tender smile shining so readily from her liquid hazel eyes. Mother had been very wonderful in her management of me, I think, though at the time it seemed so natural that I never considered the matter at all. She kept a firm control over me, so that I never thought of disputing her will or her judgment; and yet she retained my fullest confidence, and I talked to her, I think, quite as freely as most sisters talk to one another.

I fancy the only subject upon which we maintained a reserve was that of Nigel Lavender. We spoke of him as we might about anybody else; but I never heard a single word spoken of what I was almost sure was discussed between the two mothers, and I never wished even to name that matter myself.

Roy and I were passionately fond of the sea, as was

Digitized by Google

only natural, seeing we had been born and brought up at Fair Haven. I had my little dinghy, in which I was allowed to row myself alone about the harbour, in full sight of the house; but I was not allowed to go far by myself—a precaution I thought needless, though I always observed it. But I understood how to manage sail and tiller as well as either of the boys, and when they were at home we spent as much time on water as on land, no one forbidding.

We had a pretty little sailing boat called the *Sea-gull*, and we had often gone out in her right round the coast for miles. She was very fast and yet quite safe, and we had fitted her up with all sorts of conveniences.

To-day we quickly packed away an ample supply of provisions, collected the dogs, which were always wild to go, even though they did sometimes get tired of the monotony of the boat; and waving an adieu to mother's window, in the certainty that she would be watching for our signal, we soon had the sail up, and were flying through the water with that peculiarly exhilarating speed of which the *Sea-gull* was capable.

We went down the harbour first and cruised about the mouth. The sea was smooth, in spite of the light breeze which carried us along so gaily; and we could work our boat in and out of the innumerable bays and creeks without the least fear. We visited the haunts of the sea-birds, and explored our favourite nooks; and presently back we came with the flowing tide, and sailed

Digitized by Google

merrily up the harbour to find a suitable place for making an encampment and eating our lunch.

We were near home then, but it was no fun to go back for the meal. We much preferred it out of doors and alone.

"Let's go across to Pinetree Creek, and get out at that patch of white sand," said Roy. "It's a capital place for a picnic; and the dogs will enjoy stretching their legs again."

"Oh yes, let's go there. It's getting so hot on the water, and we can always get shade under the trees; and perhaps we shall see or hear something of the mysterious occupant of The Hermitage. What did you say the old thing's name was?"

"Lucas. Miss Lucas—an old maid, of course. Oh, I think she stuffs tight indoors all day! But we will have a look round. I should like to see what has been done to the place, if we can manage to get near it without being seen."

Roy and I knew every inch of The Hermitage grounds, so that there was little fear of our not being able to achieve our object. The hedges and fences were in a dilapidated condition; and although the rank growth of vegetation had shut the place in very much from the outside world, we knew plenty of ways of getting near to it without being in danger of discovery from any person within the walls.

However, lunch was our first object, so we sailed up

Digitized by Google

into the creek, and anchored our boat just below the sea-wall (if one could call it by so fine a name) which guarded the garden of The Hermitage on one side. The little beach of white sand lay just outside the boundary limit of the little house.

I am afraid we were trespassing in our next act, for we used the low wall as our landing-quay, as we had been accustomed to do in days gone by; although we did not invade the garden, as we certainly should have done had the place been empty. We only made our way along the wall, and climbed down it at the end, landing upon the white sand of the little creek, and carrying our provisions into the shade of the sheltering fringe of pine trees, whose aromatic scent quite filled the air.

It was a very delightful spot for a midday rest. The dogs, delighted to escape from the inaction of the boat, raced hither and thither in eager excitement. Wuppy did not know this spot at all, as I had not visited it lately, knowing the house to be tenanted. Wuppy was a dog that liked variety above everything, and he was filled with an insatiable curiosity. We soon lost sight of him altogether, but he returned at intervals to make sure we were still there, and then rambled off again with his nose to the ground, pursuing an irregular course hither and thither, till we lost sight of him in the wood beyond.

Chips was given over heart and soul to the pursuit of rabbits, with which the little copse abounded. We

Digitized by Google

heard him giving tongue every few minutes. He was perfectly and absolutely happy, and to call him in would have been a simple waste of breath. Besides, he was doing no harm, and we let him disport himself at will.

Monk alone stayed beside us, lying full length upon the hot sand, with his hind legs stretched out straight behind him in a favourite attitude of his. He blinked contentedly at us with his affectionate brown eyes, and received scraps of food with a polite wag of the tail.

We sat talking together long after we had finished our lunch. Roy lighted a cigarette, and tried to make me believe he enjoyed it. As a matter of fact, Roy detested tobacco, but found his dislike to it inconvenient, and was always trying to break himself of it. I told him a good deal of what had passed at the Lavenders' the other day—what Hilda and Amy had respectively said about Mr. Clarence and his cousin the colonel. Roy was interested in the story, and wondered why Nigel had objected to his sister's lover.

"Because you know, Cissy, Nigel's no fool, though that rather soft manner of his makes people think of him as one. He was at my college, you know, though he left long before I went up. He was very well thought of there, I can tell you. There's more in him than he lets the world see, and I think those rather sleepy eyes of his see a good deal."

"Well, he should say what he sees, then,' I returned

Digitized by Google

quickly, "and not just insinuate without giving a reason. I'm glad Nigel isn't my brother. His obscure ways would drive me distracted. I should want to shake him every day of my life."

Roy smiled a little as he flung away his cigarette.

"He's not half a bad fellow for all that; and I don't think he wants you for a sister any more than you want him for a brother."

I suppose I was unreasonable, but I felt a little bit annoyed.

"Of course not. We always quarrel—at least we should if Nigel could only say 'Boo' to a goose!"

Here Roy interrupted by an explosion of laughter, in which I was forced to join, being fairly caught in my own toils.

"Come along," I cried; "let's pack the boat again, and go and see what we can find out about the tenant of The Hermitage. I wish we could get a sight of her. Perhaps on fine afternoons she may come out for a little while, swathed up in shawls, just to get a breath of air. But I know she never goes out if she can help it. I believe she's been ill, and is quite an invalid still."

"I don't know whether we ought to go prying round the place now that it's let," said Roy, as we gathered up our belongings and made our way along to the wall. "I should like to see the old house and garden again well enough; but—"

"Oh, why not?" I interposed, being very inex-

Digitized by Google

perienced, and having a foolish fancy that the place belonged in some mysterious way to us, just because we had always had the run of it. "We have always run in and out as we pleased, whether it has been let or not. If by any remote chance we should catch sight of the old lady, we can make our apologies and scuttle off. But I'm sure we shan't."

"As for that," answered Roy, "I shouldn't in the least mind making her acquaintance. I call it rather hard lines that nobody calls. I've half a mind to call myself; only that might put her in an awkward position. People may be old and delicate and keep themselves to themselves, but I can't see why they need be sent to Coventry. If I see the poor old thing, I shall certainly have a shot and see if I can't be a bit friendly. I believe if mother ever paid calls she would call on her."

"Yes, I think very likely she might; but mother doesn't call anywhere now, and she wouldn't send me alone, as she begins to do to some houses where we have always known everybody. Well, I don't mind being nice to her if we have the chance. I should rather like to make friends with her if she would let us—if it were only to scandalize Lady Lavender!"

Roy laughed at my concluding words. He understood all about my little revolt at Lady Lavender's dominating influence in Fair Haven. Her word in social matters was apt to be taken as law; and even mother, since she could go about so little herself, was disposed to be

Digitized by Google

led and influenced by the judgment of her friend, and to give to Lady Lavender a precedence which I always felt with a pang of jealousy ought to have been her own.

"Where are the dogs?" asked Roy suddenly, as he finished packing the boat and sprang back again upon the wall.

Monk was standing beside me, faithful as ever. We could still hear Chips scuttling after the rabbits, and uttering short, sharp barks the while. He was safely engrossed in this occupation, and could be called up at any time. Wuppy, however, had quite disappeared. We had neither of us seen him for a considerable time. He did not seem to be rabbiting with Chips, or we should have heard his voice also. We called him several times, but got no response of any sort.

"He may be in the gardens somewhere," I said. "He's always poking his nose into all sorts of places. We may find him if we wander in; and then, you see, if anybody were to find us trespassing, we could say we had come to look for our dog."

"Happy thought! So we could," cried Roy, laughing. "Well, then, let us go boldly in, and not sneak about as though we were ashamed of ourselves."

We sprang down the low wall, and found ourselves in a tangled shrubbery, the paths of which were considerably overgrown with moss and weed. We knew every winding walk, and went along, sometimes uttering a call or a whistle for our truant; but we did not like

Digitized by Google

to make too much noise, so our summonses were not of a very emphatic nature.

Soon we reached the edge of the real thick shrubbery, and gained the limit of the garden proper. Last time I had seen it, it had been a mere wilderness, rank and neglected. I peeped with some interest between the lilac bushes to note if any change had taken place.

From where we now stood we could look right across the lawn, dotted with hawthorn and other ornamental trees, towards the low, long, picturesque front of the house. I knew just how that would look—its irregular windows, latticed and mullioned, wreathed round in honeysuckle or clematis, and the walls covered with climbing roses that were a mass of snowy blossom in June. It was not a large house, but it was straggling, and covered a good deal of ground. The roof was weather-stained, and stone-crop and lichen had grown over the red tiles in many places. There were little dormer windows in the upper story, and gables that did not match. It made the most charming picture in summer time; but, as I have said, few tenants cared to winter there, it being altogether too much overgrown and too much embowered in trees. The fall of the leaf was a season that the occupants did not care to stand more than once, though Roy and I always declared we should not mind.

Roy was a little in front of me as we reached the boundary of the sheltering shrubbery. He parted the

Digitized by Google

leafy screen with his hands, and then I heard him give a low whistle and break into a quiet laugh.

"What is it?" I asked, coming up behind.

"Look!" he answered, and pushed me in front of him, still holding back the leafy screen.

I did look, and in a moment I understood the whistle and the laugh.

There was the house, just as I had pictured it, only that the windows were no longer covered with dust and cobwebs, but clean and bright, and stood open to the summer breezes; whilst the fluttering of pretty draperies could be seen, and glimpses obtained of interiors which bespoke a cultivated taste. The lawn no longer looked like a neglected pasture, but was mown and tended; the walks were free from weeds, and flowers bloomed brilliantly in bed and border. This I had been partly prepared for, from what we had seen the other day; but I was not in the least prepared for the other sight which met our eyes, and which had evoked from Roy the low whistle of surprise.

Very near to the house—too near, many people thought, and just on the edge of the lawn—grew a fine lime tree with long, rather drooping, branches, which made a natural arbour all through the summer months. Under this tree there stood a low, cushioned wicker chair, and in the chair sat a lady, with our truant Wuppy comfortably established upon her knee, whilst at her feet there lay a fine deer-hound, who regarded

Digitized by Google

the intruder with an air of complaisant tolerance, as though too sure of his own position to trouble his head with jealousy. Wuppy was evidently exceedingly pleased with himself and his present position, and we could hear as she caressed him that the lady was talking to him in the language which dogs understand so well, and to which they give such ready response.

The lady's face was not turned our way, it was partly bent over the dog, and slightly averted from where we stood; but we saw with a start of surprise that her hair, which was uncovered by hat or cap, was of a pale golden tint, and very abundant, and that the mental picture we had drawn of an aged and decrepit invalid was ludicrously mistaken. I was perfectly certain that Miss Lucas could not be forty years old, and perhaps not nearly so much. She was not a girl, but she was anything but old; and there was something in the graceful pose of the figure and the penetrating sweetness of the tones of the voice which impressed me at once with the conviction that we were looking upon a very beautiful woman, although I could not as yet judge of her face.

I drew softly back and looked at Roy in bewilderment.

"Can that be Miss Lucas?" I asked. "Perhaps it is only a visitor staying with her."

"I don't know," answered Roy; "but we can't go spying on her like this. I think the best way is to take the bull by the horns. I shall go on, calling

Digitized by Google

Digitized by Google

Digitized by Google

Wuppy; and then when she sees us, I will apologize for the intrusion and explain. Will you come? or would you rather wait here for me?"

I was far too curious to accept this alternative.

"Oh, I will come too. I want to know if it is Miss Lucas—I want to know who she is. Roy, don't you think she looks as though she were very beautiful?"

"Yes, I do; but we could not see her very well. Any way, I'll have a shot at it. We'll make our way into the enchanted garden, even if we are chased out of it with ignominy later on."

That was just my feeling. We must dare something; and the next minute Roy boldly advanced from behind the leafy screen, calling Wuppy's name, and then stopping still as he saw that the lady had suddenly risen from her chair, and was standing looking at us.

Wuppy came running up with short barks of welcome, and the deer-hound uttered a deep bay, which was checked by his mistress, who laid a hand upon his head.

Roy's hat was off in an instant. He approached the lady with the fearless frankness which was one of his winning characteristics; whilst she stood very still, watching our approach, but without speaking or moving.

We had not been deceived. Miss Lucas (if indeed it was she) was a very beautiful woman. She was very tall, and held herself with a grace of carriage which is

Digitized by Google

quite indescribable, though it struck me almost more at the first glance than the undoubted though irregular beauty of her face. She was dressed quite plainly, in a long black robe of some soft texture that fell in statuesque folds to her feet. She had a cluster of yellow roses at her throat, and they seemed to blend in tint with the waving golden hair which crowned her head. Her complexion was exquisite, though very pale—too pale for health—and her eyes were violet blue in colour. In spite of the commanding grace of her carriage, there was something suggestive of shrinking in the way in which she looked at us. Yet there was no frown upon her face, and her lips parted with the suggestion of a smile as Roy came towards her.

"I am afraid we are all trespassers—from the dog upward," he said. "We lost him on the beach, where we had lunched; and as he did not return, we came to look for him. I see he has made himself very much at home. He always thinks himself welcome everywhere."

"He was very welcome here, poor wee man," said the lady, with a captivating smile. "I thought he must be a waif from somewhere a long way off, as there are no houses round here. I did not think of his having come by boat. I was wondering what to do with him. He has no name on his collar."

"No," I answered, joining in for the first time, "everybody in Fair Haven knows him so well; but I

Digitized by Google

think I must give him a collar, especially since he seems to make himself so very much at home wherever he goes. I'm afraid he gets rather spoiled, and thinks himself quite irresistible."

Wuppy evidently thought himself irresistible to Miss Lucas, and was fawning upon her with an air of the greatest devotion. She caressed and talked to him very sweetly, perhaps finding his attentions rather easier to respond to than our advances. I think that both Roy and I felt the same wish to show ourselves friendly to the strange lady, but it was just a little difficult to know how to do it.

"I am so glad you have taken a fancy to this dear old house," said Roy, looking around him with undisguised pleasure. "Cissy and I always say it is one of the nicest places in the world; we used always to declare we would come and live in it some day. But many people call it bad names. I hope you are comfortable here? You are Miss Lucas, are you not?"

"Yes," she answered, with a little bend of the head; and Roy went on quickly,—

"We come from Wyverne Court opposite. Our mother is a great invalid, and cannot get out; and my sister is not yet quite promoted to pay calls on her own account. But I hope you will let us think of you as a neighbour, and come and see you sometimes. We often come across in our boat. We are so fond of Pinetree Creek and the Hermitage."

Digitized by Google

Boys can dare much more than girls. I should never have ventured to make any sort of overture to a stranger lady about whom nobody knew anything, and upon whom nobody in the place had called. I felt a sort of delightful shiver at Roy's boldness, but I confess I was very pleased to hear him speak so. It did seem an unkind thing to leave a new-comer quite out in the cold; and there was something about Miss Lucas which attracted me curiously. I was quite certain—with the confident certainty of youth—that there was nothing in this beautiful woman to which any person could take exception.

"Thank you," said Miss Lucas gently, and for a moment she said no more; her eyes looked away past us, rather as though she were thinking. Then she looked at us both with a smile which entirely captivated us, and said softly,—

"I have heard of you, of course. Every one speaks of the Wyvernes of Fair Haven. I have come here to be very quiet indeed; but if you are fond of my little house and garden, and if Lady Muriel will not object, I shall be very pleased to see you here when you bring your boat across."

I felt my heart give a little throb. It would be delightful to have a sort of romantic friendship with this recluse at the Hermitage, whom nobody ever visited or saw. I think Miss Lucas must have seen something of the eagerness in my eyes, for again she smiled that

Digitized by Google

singularly sweet smile; and as a servant at that moment appeared bringing a tray from the house, she said, looking from one to the other,—

"You must stay, now you are here, and have a cup of coffee with me. I daresay your picnic has not been very substantial."

She ordered more cups, whilst Roy fetched chairs, and in a few more minutes we were seated—astonishing thought—with Miss Lucas in her garden. Wuppy leaped immediately into his former seat upon her knee, regardless of her convenience; but she would not have him ejected. She was a real lover of dogs, as could be seen at once; and when she caught sight of Monk, who had been ordered to remain in the background, she insisted that he should be brought into the circle and introduced to her faithful Ross. In talking of the dogs and whistling up Chips, who was also welcomed with sweetness and kindness, we forgot our first sense of awkwardness, and grew friendly to a wonderful extent.

Roy and I chatted freely to Miss Lucas. Perhaps it was only afterwards that we realized how much we had said and how little she had. Of course it was natural. We were young, and our lives held no hidden secrets. We liked Miss Lucas, and she was one of those listeners who draw you on by the power and charm of sympathy till you feel ready to tell anything. Her coffee was excellent, and the dogs said the same in eloquent

Digitized by Google

language of her biscuits. We made our small pair do tricks, and we all laughed merrily together over their little jealousies and efforts to overreach each other.

It was quite a delightful time we spent in that shady garden, and our hostess seemed to enjoy it with us. Yet I remember often looking at her with the feeling that there was something in her face which I could not fathom. It looked to me like the shadow of a deep, deep sorrow, which time had never healed, although it had given her the power to put it aside and take up her life again on other lines.

Roy I found on comparing notes, had just the same impression. That she had been recently very ill Miss Lucas did not deny. She said she had come to this warm southern place by the advice of her doctor, who warned her that she must take great care of herself for some time to come. She had not the strength or the wish to go about. She liked to live her life within the walls of her little home and in her shady garden. Her face had the look of one who spends many long hours in dreaming over the past. Her eyes often took a far-away expression, and then the corners of the lips would droop, and for a moment there would come a strangely pathetic wistfulness into her face; and when I saw that expression, I felt that I must turn my eyes away, for it seemed as if I were looking at something upon which I had no right to gaze.

When we took our departure, she walked with us as

Digitized by Google

far as the sea-wall; and Roy invited her to come for a sail over the shining waters of the bay. But she smiled and shook her head.

"Not to-day," she answered gently.

"Another time, then," said Roy, as he sprang into the boat.

"Perhaps," she said, with an enigmatic little smile—"perhaps, perhaps."

"We shall come for you," he said, waving his cap. "Thank you so much for receiving us so kindly. We were very informal in our way of calling."

The smile lighted her face again.

"Perhaps if you had been formal you would not have seen me," she answered, and waved her hand to us as the sail slowly filled. Next minute she had turned and disappeared into the shrubbery beyond; and I looked at Roy eagerly, saying,—

"How beautiful she is!"

"Yes," he answered gravely, "a very beautiful woman, and a very sorrowful one."

"O Roy! you think that too?"

"Nobody could help thinking it who has a grain of observation or intuition."

"I wonder who she is, and why she has come, and what is the matter? Roy, do you think mother will let us—me, I mean—go and see her again?"

"Yes, I think so. Mother is very kind, and we will tell her what we think about Miss Lucas."

Digitized by Google

"But what will Lady Lavender say? she will not call."

I am sorry to have to confess that Roy made a rude gesture, indicative of a good deal of contemptuous indifference to the opinion of the autocrat of Fair Haven.

"Mother is not a baby to be led by the nose, even by Lady Lavender," he said. "I shall go and tell her everything when I get home, and you will see it will be all right."

And so it was. Roy had a way with him which most people found it difficult to resist, mother included. She was surprised at our adventure, and perhaps she would have preferred that it had not taken place, but she was willing to regard me still as something of a child; so that if Miss Lucas had no objection to our landing sometimes in her garden, and paying a little informal visit on our own account—well, she would not actually forbid it. She thought it probable that the stranger would remain only a short time in that lonely house; and since she did not desire to be called upon or to mix in society, that simplified the situation a good deal.

It was a little more free and easy than was altogether to mother's taste, but she recognized the duty of kindness to anybody in trouble; and though she would have liked to know more about this Miss Lucas, and did not look altogether satisfied at my rapturous description of her beauty and charm, yet there was nothing whatever

Digitized by Google

whispered to her discredit, and if Roy and I went together and not too often, she would not hinder our doing so.

I was delighted with this permission, which was more than I had expected to obtain. Perhaps mother recognized the fact that my life was rather a monotonous one, and that I was debarred from a good many amusements which came to other girls. I liked a little bit of romance above everything, and it had never come in my way before. Now I seemed to be getting into the thick of it. It was uncertain as yet how far Amy's engagement would supply me with that sort of diet; but certainly our clandestine friendship with the beautiful inhabitant of the Hermitage, about whom nobody knew anything, was quite like a chapter out of a book. I wove a number of romances in which Miss Lucas was the heroine, and was quite convinced that life was going to be more interesting for me now than it had been for a considerable time previously.

Digitized by Google

CHAPTER IV.

NEW FACES.

"GOOD!" exclaimed Roy, looking up from a letter he was reading at breakfast-time; "Old Hawke's coming to-morrow. He's just finished the catalogue of Aunt Joan's library, and now he can come on and pay his promised visit here."

Truth to tell, I was not quite as pleased as I tried to be at this news. Of course I knew that Mr. Hawke was coming to us; he had been invited long ago. He had been so good to Roy during his illness that we owed him a great debt of gratitude. Yet in spite of all that, it did to a certain extent spoil my pleasure in Roy's company when some friend of his came to stay here.

"How long will he stay?" I asked, trying to appear pleased.

"Oh, I don't know. A week or so, I daresay. He wants to be in Oxford part of the 'long,' I know; but I daresay we can persuade him to stay a fair time. He's an awfully good fellow, though he's not what you call a brilliant society man;" and Roy laughed.

Digitized by Google

"Is he very ugly?" I asked frankly.

"No," answered Roy at once, "far from it. He's got a rather fine face, but it's an odd one; and he wears glasses, so that you can't see his eyes well. You might think him ugly at a first casual glance, but you'll soon get to feel differently. It's a face one likes to look at after a bit."

"He's a sort of a don, isn't he?"

"Yes, a fellow now, and an awfully clever one. I don't know if you care for clever men; but if you do you'll like old Hawke. He'll rather like being here, for he knows Nigel too. I fancy they were rather chummy at Oxford, though Hawke's the older man by a little. You'll be nice to him, won't you, Cissy? for he's mortally afraid of all ladies, and I've never been able to get him to the scratch before."

"He's been staying quite a time with Aunt Joan though."

"Yes; Aunt Joan isn't like the average woman. Somehow those two seemed to understand each other. She took quite a liking to him, and I never saw him able to come so well out of his shell as he did with her and at her house. It must have been a liberal education for him. We shall have him quite the polished gem in a little while."

"And I suppose he reads and writes a great deal. He won't want to be always out with us in the boat and the garden?"

Digitized by Google

"Oh, bless you, no!" laughed Roy; "he's always got some work on hand. The difficulty is to get him to leave his books. He'll just establish himself in the library, you'll see, and there he'll remain, unless he's dug out. He is editing some edition of school classics now, and that takes him a lot of time. He's just beginning to get on well, after having had a tremendously hard struggle as a young man. I'm most awfully glad about it; but Hawke's a rattling good fellow at the bottom, though he keeps it to himself in a wonderful way."

When we went up to mother's room a little later, it was to find that she had some news for us too.

"Garth has a few days' leave, and is coming down almost directly," she said. "And it is quite true that the regiment is to be sent to Watchet Bay in October. That will be delightful! We shall see so much of Garth when he is there, and if he can spend his long leave at home it will be quite like old times. We shall be all together once more, as we used to be before you boys began going to school and college."

Mother's eyes were bright. I think a first-born son fills in his mother's heart a place which no other child can ever do. I have noticed it often. Mother loved Roy and me most tenderly—we never felt the least lack in her love; yet there was something in her face when she talked about Garth which I never saw there at other times. Perhaps she had come to lean upon him

Digitized by Google

rather, since our father had died and left her as a sort of sacred trust to his eldest son. Anyhow, it was always a source of keen joy to her when Garth was to be at home; and I think he reciprocated her love to the full, though he was never demonstrative.

We went up to tell the news to the Lavenders presently. We had begun to resume the habits of our youth, and to interchange almost daily visits. We found them also in a small domestic excitement, although they took their excitements more quietly than we did. Amy was the only one who showed it to any extent, and it was to be pardoned in her; for Mr. Clarence was coming over that very afternoon—he was to arrive within an hour. He was staying in a country house not far distant, and would ride across to see his betrothed. Then they would arrange about the visit he was to pay later on; and naturally Amy was in a little flutter of excitement, and was looking her very prettiest.

"You will stay and see him?" she said, flitting up to me.

"I should like to, unless we shall be in the way."

"Oh no; it is only a call upon everybody. I should like you to be there. I want to know what you think about him. You are almost like one of the family now, you know."

I certainly did not know anything of the sort, and was rather indignant with Amy for saying it; but as a matter of fact she was so fluttered she hardly knew

Digitized by Google

what she was saying, so I did not trouble to contradict her. It was a hot afternoon, and we were all out in the garden, where coolness could always be obtained in that lofty place. Nigel presently lounged up, and dropped into the seat beside me.

"So you have been trespassing on forbidden waters," he said, with one of his quick, rather inscrutable glances, "and have scaled the fortress no others have dared to approach!"

I was conscious of flushing up to the roots of my hair. I was also conscious of feeling rather angry. I had particularly begged mother not to mention our little escapade to Lady Lavender, nor our wish to make the acquaintance of Miss Lucas in a rather unconventional way. Mother had promised, and I knew she was to be trusted implicitly. Who, then, could have spoken of this thing to Nigel? Not Roy, I was sure. He would have told me had he entertained any such intention. He must have found it out by himself somehow.

Now Nigel had always had that tiresome trick of knowing everything. It had irritated us as children; it irritated me still. We always used to declare he had eyes in the back of his head; but even a double set of eyes would not have enabled him to see our interview with Miss Lucas; and yet to what else could he be alluding?

"You *do* mix your metaphors so there is no understanding you," I answered, rather snappishly. "I'm not

Digitized by Google

aware of having scaled any fortress except this precious Eagle's Crag of yours. And in hot weather one feels that it is simple cruelty to animals to expect anything human to face your glaring rocks! You ought to put up a lift or something. I'm sure there are enough contrivances going nowadays for saving trouble."

I said this to turn the subject, which I had no wish to pursue; but Nigel had a persistent way with him, which to-day proved very aggravating.

"'A daughter of the gods, divinely tall, and most divinely fair.' Is that the way the quotation runs? Very appropriate, is it not?"

"To whom? to Amy? I never thought of it in that light. Or perhaps you are trying to pay a compliment to me; only I'm not particularly tall nor particularly fair. You'd better keep it for yourself; it fits much better!"

A shadowy smile played round the finely-cut lips of my tormentor. I think he knew he had made me angry, but he did not appear to mind it in the least.

"Does she admit all bold rovers to her enchanted garden? I think I shall try my luck one of these days."

I turned my shoulder slightly round away from him.

"You can do exactly as you like; it's no concern of mine."

"It would not be poaching on your preserves?"

"I don't know what you mean."

Digitized by Google

"Pardon me, but I think you do."

Well, I did. I must own it; but I was goaded into the retort.

Now I turned upon him with flashing eyes.

"What do you mean? and how do you know? and why are you so aggravating about it? What is it to you where we go or what we do? We are not answerable to you!"

"Not in the smallest degree; but the natural man is not devoid of curiosity. I am curious to know how you came to go."

"How do you know that we did go?" I could not refrain from asking, seeing it was no use to try to ride the high horse.

"There is no mystery about it. I saw you with my own eyes. I was on the opposite side of the creek when you took your departure, and the fair unknown came and waved you a farewell over the wall. Nothing more occult than that, I assure you; and I have kept my observations to myself till this moment. You need not be afraid of betrayal—from me."

For I had given a quick glance in the direction of Lady Lavender, and Nigel had appeared to read my meaning by instinct.

"I think you are quite right," he added. "I hate the thought of any human being living the life of a recluse. Nothing can be worse, whether the isolation is voluntary or not."

Digitized by Google

I suddenly felt friendly towards my companion. I did not mean to tell him anything about Miss Lucas; but I liked him for his words, and also for the discretion he was observing towards the small secret he had chanced upon. I did not particularly want to have confidences with Nigel, but for the moment I liked him better than I had done for some time. I thought he was growing almost handsome in a long, lank fashion. Of course he was not to be compared for a moment with Garth or Roy, but he was improving upon what he had been in by-gone years, when I had frankly dubbed him a fright.

Further talk was, however, arrested at that minute by the sudden arrival upon the scene of a new-comer. It required no introduction to tell me who he was. I had seen his portrait; but even if I had not, Amy's face would have been enough. It was Mr. Clarence, and he was receiving a well-bred yet almost affectionate greeting from the whole party—just such a welcome as he had the right to expect.

When he was seated in our midst, I looked curiously at him, and decided that he was certainly handsome, and looked decidedly like a soldier, though he was not one. I was also curious to observe Nigel's manner towards him; but it betrayed no sort of coldness or disapproval. Nigel was always quiet and self-possessed, and he received his future brother-in-law without the smallest shade of embarrassment. If Mr. Clarence knew

Digitized by Google

that Nigel had opposed his engagement, neither he nor Nigel showed any trace of such knowledge.

Amy looked radiantly happy. It was quite amusing to watch her face. I wondered what it could feel like, and thought it rather foolish, though perhaps it was rather pretty too in its way. Mr. Clarence did not appear to take much more notice of her than of the rest, although he often let his eyes rest upon her whilst he was talking. The conversation was all about surface things, and by-and-by Roy broke in suddenly,—

"Oh, do you know it's quite true about Garth's regiment being stationed at Watchet Bay in October? We heard this morning." And turning to Mr. Clarence he added, smiling, "I was reminded of it just now, because your relative, Colonel Clarence, is its colonel. He and my brother are great friends."

Remembering what Hilda had said with reference to Mr. Clarence and his cousin, I could not help looking rather hard at him as Roy spoke these words. Did his face change, I asked myself next minute, or was it only my fancy because of what Hilda had said? Certainly the change (if change there were) was not at all marked. I fancied I saw a subdued gleam in the dark eyes, and a little contraction of the lips, but that was all. When he spoke his voice sounded quite natural.

"I have not seen my cousin for some while. He was on foreign service for a good spell, and we have not chanced to meet since he came back. But we were

Digitized by Google

brought up together almost like brothers, as I think I have told before. Edgar was always cleverer than I, and he got on capitally in the service. If I am in this part of the country when he is quartered here, we shall enjoy meeting once again."

The talk then passed to other matters, and if I had expected to make any discovery by my unassisted genius, I was disappointed. I came to the conclusion that Hilda had sharper sight than I, or that she was prejudiced; for I could see nothing suspicious in Mr. Clarence's manner, and he was certainly a very handsome, polished gentleman, and had seen enough of the world to be a very interesting talker on most subjects.

Roy and I did not stay to see the last of him, but departed first; Nigel accompanying us down the much-abused rocky path, teasing me to explain just where I should like the lift arranged.

"Only when I put it up," he concluded, "you must undertake to justify the cost by the increased number of your visits;" and on hearing that I said no more, for I had no intention of giving Nigel cause to think I was so particularly attached to Eagle's Crag.

Roy told of the expected arrival of our guest to-morrow, and Nigel showed a warmer interest than I had expected.

"Eric Hawke is a fine fellow," he said; "I shall be exceedingly glad to renew our friendship. I hardly know why it dropped so completely, except that I could

Digitized by Google

never get him here on a visit, and I seldom went to Oxford when I had once left."

"He was too poor to pay visits in those days," said Roy; "at least that is what he felt about it. He was poor, and he was proud, and he had to work very hard. But fortune's wheel has taken a turn with him at last, and now he is getting on famously, and I believe he could become quite a fashionable coach if he chose to go in for it. All the fellows he takes up do well. I know what a lot his teaching did for me my last term. He makes you work, but then he shows you how uncommonly interesting it is—not just cram; he shows you the other side—the beauty and poetry or the scientific interest. It doesn't matter what it is, he always makes it interesting."

And then we said good-bye to Nigel, and dropped down upon our own garden by a little unfrequented path, and a bridge across the road. I don't know whether Nigel meant to come with us, but I did not ask him, and I don't think it occurred to Roy as needful. But Nigel was growing a little bit more formal in some of his ways.

"Did you like Mr. Clarence?" I asked Roy when we were alone.

"Well, one didn't see enough of him either to like or dislike. He's rather too much the society man for my taste; but then that'll suit Lady Lavender and Amy down to the ground."

Digitized by Google

I supposed it would. Certainly Amy seemed radiantly happy; yet as I stood that evening after dinner, looking over the darkening waters of the harbour, watching the lights twinkling out from the yachts anchored up for the night, and listening to the soft plash of the waves against the wall just below, I could not help wondering what it would be like to leave one's own beautiful, peaceful home, and go right away—alone—with a man one had known but a short time, as Amy had known her lover. Was it not a great and rather terrible step to take? It seemed so to me just then. And yet how many girls took it quite as a matter of course, and led happy and comfortable lives in homes of their own afterwards.

For my own part, I could not imagine life anywhere but at Fair Haven. I hardly thought I could live without the sight of the sea and the music of its wonderful voice. Even the wild sea-gulls were my friends, and amongst those that fished in our harbour there were many that knew me well, and that I could single out, and bring to our wall by a cry which Roy and I had used from childhood when we placed food for the gulls to fetch.

And yet of late there had come over me a feeling that I was leading a rather idle, purposeless life here in this pleasant place. I had my little duties, it is true, but they were few and easy. I had much time on my hands, and I sometimes wondered if I made enough of

Digitized by Google

it. The days drifted by pleasantly and easily, and each day seemed to fill itself with trifling matters; but there were moments when it would come over me that youth and health and even wealth in moderate measure must have been given to me for some purpose, and I wondered whether I were not playing the part of the man who buried his pound in the earth because he did not exactly know how best to use it.

Perhaps it was talking with Hilda latterly that had aroused this train of thought. Hilda was distinctly beginning to revolt against the treadmill life of fashionable society. She had told me with some bitterness that she was sick to death of doing nothing but go from house to house, place to place, just to seek amusement, and to see and be seen. She had even gone so far as to say she would rather earn her own bread in the overcrowded labour market (but for the injustice to the real workers) than go on as she had been doing for the few last years of her life. Hilda went a good deal further than I. For no such idea would ever have entered my head, and I could not understand the almost fierce revolt she felt against the trammels of her life; but it had certainly set me thinking about a number of subjects which had never troubled my head before, and I had begun to wonder whether there would ever come something for me to do to help my fellow-creatures, without my being forced into any open quarrel with my pleasant life.

Digitized by Google

Next day Mr. Hawke arrived. I had been considerably divided in mind about this friend of Roy's. Of course I was very grateful to him for his goodness to my brother during his illness, but I was half disposed to be jealous that he had been able to take the place which I felt by right belonged to me. Also I had the impression that the man was something of a recluse (which was true) and of a boor (which was not), and I believed that his coming would decidedly spoil that part of the summer vacation during which he was to be our guest.

But I soon found out that I was wrong. Mr. Hawke was not at all the awkward individual I had pictured, although he was very silent at first, and was visibly shy in the unaccustomed presence of ladies.

Mother received him from her couch in the drawing-room, and I never knew anybody like mother for putting people at their ease with her. Then she and Aunt Joan were sisters, and Mr. Hawke had come straight from Aunt Joan's house, where he must have enjoyed himself greatly, for his face quite lighted up as he spoke of Hurst Royal and its mistress. As Roy had said, his face was a fine one, if not exactly handsome. It suited his name, I thought, for there was a quick keenness in his glance which one associates with a hawk's eye; and his thin nose was slightly aquiline and beak-like, though not to an exaggerated extent. His head was very fine—the head of a thinker and a

Digitized by Google

dreamer, though the latter tendency was much counteracted by the habits of a lifetime of struggle. Mr. Hawke looked old to be a friend of our bright-faced Roy, and yet that the two were much attached to each other could be seen at once.

Roy took him out, and they paced the terraces together in eager talk; and after dinner, when we sat out in the twilight and sipped our coffee, whilst the darkness spread over the water below and the lights shone out upon the gleaming tide, they went on with their talk of men and things, and I sat by listening and learning.

For it was not mere chatter and gossip, such as I had been used to hear between Roy and his comrades—anecdotes of games, or the pranks played by undergraduates upon one another or upon the "dons." Another side of college life was opened to me now, and one which struck me as being far more really interesting.

I need not go into detail—a story is not the place for such talk—but I began to understand how all the world over the burning questions of the day are seething. The great battle between right and wrong is everywhere being fought, and at the great centres of intellectual activity it has to be grappled with in a resolute spirit.

They spoke of things beyond my comprehension, of phases of thought the names of which I hardly knew; but all the way through I could understand what had become Mr. Hawke's dominating motive in life—

Digitized by Google

the resolute crusade against those specious intellectual doubts which were undermining the faith of so many young men, and which so often led them into throwing aside all exterior standards of right and wrong, and becoming their own judges and lawgivers.

As I listened, I began to understand Roy's enthusiasm for his friend. Mr. Hawke's face seemed to gather a wonderful power from the earnestness within him, and one felt he could listen for ever to his low, vibrating voice. It mattered not to me that I often could not understand him intellectually. There was that about his utterances which seemed to speak to one's spirit, and make you feel his meaning whether you understood or not. It was plain that his pupils were to him a sacred charge. He was no mere crammer, bent on just putting into their heads as much as those heads would hold. He had a message for them which went deeper and rose higher than anything he could teach them from scholastic books. I was more impressed by Mr. Hawke's intimate talk with Roy (for I think he soon forgot my very presence) than I had been by anything which had come my way for a long time. It gave me food for much thought; and when he by-and-by left us and went up to his room, I said eagerly to Roy,—

"Isn't he a very good man?"

"He is splendid!" answered Roy enthusiastically. "I can't tell you what a power for good he is to the men who know him. He gets such a grip upon them.

Digitized by Google

I can't tell how it's done, but so it is. They may try to laugh about him, and make fun of some of his odd ways; but they reverence him more than they do any other man in the place. You'll never hear any fellow, however lax or irreverent, pass beyond a certain limit if Hawke is present; and yet he never 'jaws' or makes himself a nuisance. You can tell that from hearing him talk to-night. It's what one feels is in him, not what he says exactly, that makes the impression. I don't know how many fellows have not cause to bless him from the bottom of their hearts! I know I have. Life at Oxford isn't all as easy and pleasant as it seems on the surface. There are ugly things to be seen and heard there. I might have fallen into some company which would have left its stain upon me for life, if it hadn't been for Hawke; and dozens of young fellows just up, and with all their experience to buy, could say the same."

I laid my hand on Roy's arm in token of sympathy. I did not altogether understand, and I felt that I must not ask questions; but I felt that Roy, with all his buoyant brightness, had been through some searching experiences during the past three years. I gathered as much even from his talk with Mr. Hawke; I was quite certain of it as I watched his face in the moonlight.

"It must bo a beautiful thing to help others like that,' I said, "as Mr. Hawke has done."

Digitized by Google

"Yes; and almost more beautiful still when you see him almost ignorant of it. He is always in the forefront of the battle, yet does not know what a standard-bearer he is."

So that Mr. Hawke's presence at Fair Haven did not become in the least an incubus. Indeed I should not have complained had he spent a little more of his time with us than he did; for he was very busy over some work he had undertaken, and liked the quiet seclusion of the library better than any of the attractions that we had to offer out of doors.

On the third day of his visit, however, Garth arrived, and that brought an element of distraction into our midst.

Garth was every inch a soldier—a fine, handsome man of rather magnificent appearance. All the household bowed down before him when he appeared, and vied one with another in doing him honour. I was almost amused sometimes at the additional ceremony which was observed during his visits, although I don't think he desired anything of the sort or was ever aware of it.

It was pretty to see his chivalrous gentleness to mother. He seemed to try to take our father's protecting manner towards her. He was very like what our father must have been at his age. Roy and I took after mother; but Garth was every inch a Wyverne, and mother could scarcely take her eyes off him when

Digitized by Google

he was in her presence. He always waited upon her with sedulous care, and I used to find myself quite superseded when I came to read to her or be her companion.

Garth, of course, was always much occupied when he first came home; there were so many things waiting for the master to settle. The Wyverne property was not a large one, but still it embraced a considerable portion of the Fair Haven village, and little questions were often arising which the master alone could settle. Mother looked after things in his absence as well as she could, with the aid of our faithful old James, who was butler and steward in one. Garth was very anxious to do his duty by the people, although he did not see cause for giving up his profession, which was so dear to him. He was very glad, however, to think of his being located in the immediate vicinity for a time. That would enable him to keep an eye on things at home, and see if all were going as it should.

"And so it is actually settled about Watchet Bay?" we asked early in his visit. "You will really come there; and for how long?"

"Well, that is uncertain, of course. Things may turn up; but I daresay we shall be there for a fair spell."

"And Colonel Clarence will come too?"

"Of course. What do you know about him?"

"Nothing but what you have told us. He is a great friend of yours, is he not?"

Digitized by Google

"Yes: Clarence is a very fine fellow, and a splendid soldier. I shan't soon forget him in Africa when we were there. I never saw a man so cool under fire and in deadly peril as he. Always in the front of everything. We used to say he must bear a charmed life. I can't understand now how he came off almost scathless time after time, considering how he exposed himself."

"Recklessly?" queried Roy.

"Well, it almost amounted to recklessness sometimes; and yet he never actually crossed the boundary-line which transforms courage into foolhardiness. The men adored him, and would go anywhere with him. It was wonderful what a power he got over them. The natives, too, began to believe he was invulnerable, and to think him a superhuman being; and perhaps that helped."

"I suppose he has plenty of decorations then?"

"Yes; the Victoria Cross for one, and any number of medals. He hates being pumped about his adventures though, so don't you try to make him tell of his own prowess. I used to have an idea in those days that he was very unhappy, and that life had no more attraction for him. I may have been wrong, of course; but that is how it struck some of us. However, if he did not value life, it stuck to him resolutely, and his acts of daring only helped to raise him to rank quicker and quicker. He got his steps wonderfully fast. He is one of the youngest colonels now, and if he goes on he may be a general in good time."

Digitized by Google

"Do you know his cousin—Mr. Clarence?"

"No; but I've heard him speak of a cousin. Do you know him yourselves?"

"He's just got engaged to Amy Lavender. We saw him the other day. They knew your colonel was his cousin. And we were talking about your coming to Watchet Bay."

"So little Amy is engaged, is she, and to Clarence's cousin? Well, if he is a patch upon Clarence himself, she will be a lucky girl. How are all the Lavenders? Is her ladyship as full of airs and graces, and does she rule with autocratic sway as of old?"

And then we laughingly plunged into local gossip, and did not cease until the clocks had struck the midnight hour—which for us was one of almost unprecedented lateness.

Digitized by Google

CHAPTER V.

A DAY OF DISASTER.

GARTH was gone. Mr. Hawke was a good deal engrossed with his work, and Nigel monopolized a considerable amount of his spare time. Roy and I were left pretty much to our own devices by day, and found plenty of amusement and occupation in and about Fair Haven. There were several local gaieties on foot, a little pastoral play at Eagle's Crag being one. Roy and I had both to take part in it, and so we were up there more than usual, and had to give some time daily to the study of our parts at home.

September had come now, and some of the sporting men went out with their guns. But there was not much game in our immediate neighbourhood, and at no time was Roy a very ardent sportsman. He was not strong enough yet for the long tramps over stubble fields and moors in which the souls of so many men delight, and he contented himself with carrying his gun when we went for strolls together, and taking "pot-shots," as he dubbed them, at any partridge or hare that

Digitized by Google

he might see on his way. He often brought home a fair bag even in this desultory fashion, and was quite content to take his shooting easily.

Our friendship, if such it could be called, with the mysterious inmate of The Hermitage had made no further advance during this time. We had once more gone across and invaded the garden, but she was nowhere to be seen; and presently the servant who had seen us before, and brought us coffee on our last visit, came out and informed us that her mistress was lying down with a very bad headache; whereupon we withdrew instantly, feeling a little as though we had been ordered off.

Most likely it was quite true that Miss Lucas had a bad headache—she looked very delicate, and had come for rest and recovery—but all the same there was a lingering fear in our minds that perhaps she had not really liked our intrusion upon her privacy, when she had had time to think the matter over. It was unconventional, and she did appear to wish to remain very quietly in her retreat; and so, having other matters engrossing our minds, we had not made any further attempt to enter the enchanted garden, as Nigel had called it, or to scale the fortress wall.

I think I was a little vexed that Nigel should have discovered anything about it; and perhaps the knowledge that the secret was not all our own served to dispossess it of some of its charm.

To-day, as it chanced, we were coming home from a

Digitized by Google

ramble we had taken on the other side of the water. Our boat lay moored in the creek, but we had not landed upon The Hermitage wall or intruded into the garden.

We had rambled along the moors above, and Roy had shot a few birds in a negligent fashion when the mood was on him. Now we were coming back towards our boat through the pine wood. I was walking on in front, and Roy was behind with his gun, and we were chattering away together—at least I was talking, and Roy was putting in a word now and again—when I was startled by the report of his gun.

I had seen no bird, and it was not Roy's way to fire in such a sudden fashion without warning me. I turned suddenly, and then felt all the blood ebbing from my face.

Roy was leaning against a pine trunk, looking ghastly. That was all I could see in that moment, and just for an instant I felt the hope seize me that he had accidentally hurt one of the dogs. It was too terrible to credit that he should have hurt himself. I thrust the thought away fiercely.

In a moment I was by his side.

"What is it, Roy, what is it?" I cried, in an agony of apprehension.

"I caught my foot in those roots," he answered, speaking very slowly, his figure swaying slightly. "The gun went off; I was carrying it carelessly perhaps. It is my foot—"

Digitized by Google

Then his voice failed altogether, and I could only guide his fall as he collapsed downwards, and lay white and senseless amongst the tall ferns and brackens. For one awful moment I believed him dead, and I think my senses almost deserted me. Then it came to me that he had only spoken of his foot. "That could not kill him," I suddenly cried in my thoughts. I sprang to my feet. I bent over and pulled away the brackens. Then I saw what made me shudder with terror and horror, and yet gave me a certain confidence and hope. Men did not die of wounds like that—though the blood was oozing out, and I dared not touch the wounded limb.

What could I do? The boat was near, but the tide was running in strong. It would take some time to row back alone, and all that while Roy would be lying senseless and bleeding in the wood.

Then it flashed upon me—The Hermitage! It was quite close, and its mistress was reported to be never out. She could not be angry with me if I came to her in such sore need. Common humanity would prevent her turning a deaf ear to my appeal; and as I thought of the sweet face as I had seen it in the garden, and of the gentle, kindly way in which we and our pets had been received, I was sure, very sure, that I should meet with no harsh response to my appeal for aid. I would go to Miss Lucas and tell her.

Indeed I was half-way towards the house whilst still

Digitized by Google

pursuing this train of thought. I knew the gap in the hedge where I could get from the wood to the garden. I made for it with all possible speed, and next moment I was racing along the shrubbery paths, and had caught sight of the golden head of the mistress of The Hermitage, moving about amongst the flowers.

The dogs were beforehand with me. Monk had stayed behind with Roy, the instinct of watching over something helpless being strong within him; but Chips and Wuppy were racing along ahead of me. They had reached Miss Lucas long before I had done so, and were fawning upon her—Chips with a certain impetuosity and purpose which betrayed his knowledge of the need for help, though Wuppy appeared serenely unconscious of anything amiss, and only wanted notice and petting for himself.

Miss Lucas returned the eager caresses, and fronted round to see who was coming. Next moment I had reached her side, but in such a condition of breathless agitation that for the moment I could not speak.

Then she knew that something was the matter, and instantly her face changed. She took my hands in hers and held them in a strong, helpful clasp. She drew me towards her as if to still my tremblings, and the sweet voice asked very gently,—

"Little girl, what is the matter?"

"Roy!" I gasped, catching my breath and forcing the words out. "Didn't you hear a shot? It was Roy.

Digitized by Google

His gun went off. He has shot himself — in the foot."

I added the last words lest Miss Lucas should fear the worst. As it was, I expected her to shudder, turn pale, become temporarily distracted. But nothing of the kind occurred. She looked at me, taking in the full meaning of my words, and then asked, just in the same calm, steadfast way as before,—

"Where?"

"Out there—just beyond your garden—in the wood. Oh, you will send—you will help him! He may be bleeding to death! I don't know—I am so frightened."

Miss Lucas, still holding my hands, moved quickly towards the house. There was no sign of fear about her, nor even of dismay; yet every look and tone told me that I had not appealed to her in vain.

"We will go to him—directly," she said. "Don't shake so, little girl. We will do everything for him that can be done. It is not likely that the bleeding will be very severe. Don't make up your mind to needless horrors. Now sit down in that chair just for a few minutes. We will be ready to go to his help before you have got your breath again."

I had to obey. There was something in Miss Lucas's gentle voice which compelled submission, I scarcely knew why. I sank down shivering but thankful, feeling the awful burden of responsibility lifted from my shoulders. I heard Miss Lucas speaking in the hall.

Digitized by Google

I heard flying footsteps about the house. Then she returned with a glass in her hands which she put to my lips.

"Drink this, little girl," she said softly; "and then you shall go back to Roy."

Again I obeyed without a struggle. As soon as I had swallowed the wine I felt better. My head ceased to whirl. I felt able to breathe and to think connectedly.

We went out again into the garden. There we found two maidservants and the gardener ready to accompany us. They were all laden with sundry things, I hardly knew what or cared to ask. They were going to Roy's help—that was all I cared to know.

I had noticed before that the servant I had seen at Miss Lucas's house was not a native of these parts, and that she had a kind and clever face and a capable manner. I observed the same thing about the second woman, seen to-day for the first time. Servants and mistress impressed me alike as being different from the ordinary run of their kind. I wondered if the maids shared in any way in the mystery surrounding their mistress; but at such a moment as this I had not much room in my mind for speculations.

I led the way with Miss Lucas. We quickly came upon Roy, lying white and helpless on the ground, with Monk sitting beside him and whining softly as if in distress. But Roy's eyes were open by this time, though

Digitized by Google

they looked dim and dazed. Miss Lucas stepped quickly up to him and bent over him. I noticed in a moment the perfect self-control of her manner. She neither trembled nor turned pale, nor shrank from the sight of the wounded foot. She appeared in some indescribable way absolute mistress of the situation, and when I saw that, the anxious flutterings of my heart became stilled.

She raised Roy's head and gave him stimulant. She spoke to him in gentle, reassuring tones. She felt his pulse, gave him another drink, and then motioned to the servants to bring warm rugs and wrap about him.

"We will get you to the house very quickly. You will be better there," she said. "I will take care of this poor foot, and we will soon have it dressed and comfortable."

Roy was not yet able to speak, being still faint and bewildered, but I saw the responsive look in his eyes; and again I noted with surprise the deft, skilful movements of the servants as they wrapped their rugs round Roy, and so arranged matters that he could easily be lifted in them and carried along.

Miss Lucas was bending over the foot at which I scarcely dared to look, and quietly and gently cutting away the boot from it. Roy winced a little, but her touch was so gentle that he never shrank from it. It was as firm, too, as it was gentle, and I looked on at her in amaze. There was a quiet power and air of experience and aptitude about her which was incompre-

Digitized by Google

hensible. Even a gun-shot wound did not appear to alarm her. She quietly removed the boot, wrapped up the bleeding foot (at which I dared not look), and had dressings handed to her by one of the maids; then taking possession of the wounded member herself, she said,—

"Lift him carefully, the three of you, and we will carry him in.—Little girl" (this to me), "go on in front, and hold back the branches, and tell us if there are any stumps and impediments in the path."

Roy, although tall, was too slight to be a heavy weight, and yet I was astonished at the ease with which those two women and the gardener lifted and carried him. There is as much knack as strength wanted on occasions like these, and what surprised me was the remarkable knack shown by these people.

They got him to the house, but he was again unconscious when they laid him down. They had taken him in through a door-window into a small room on the ground-floor, which Roy always declared he should make his study when we came to live here. It had the appearance of a room not much used at present. It had a comfortable wide sofa, where Roy was laid down; but the rest of the furniture was rather scanty. There were a davenport, at which Miss Lucas sat down to write a note, a few chairs, and an old oak bureau. Beyond that there was little in the room.

Miss Lucas turned to me with the note in her hand.

"We must have a surgeon to your brother," she said

Digitized by Google

quietly. "We will take care of him till you can get one. He will do very well with us for a little while. But the doctor must be told. Let him have that note. Then he will know what to bring. How soon do you think he can be here?"

"Our doctor lives at Queensbridge," I answered. "But he is clever. Mother has him for everything. The tide is running in now. We could get the boat there quickly. But I must tell mother first, I suppose. And —and—may Roy stay here—till we can get him home?"

Miss Lucas smiled at the question.

"Do you think we shall turn him out into the wood again the moment your back is turned, little girl?" she asked; and then I don't know what came over me—I had to do it. I held up my face to her for a kiss, whispering in a choked voice,—

"You *are* so good to us!"

The kiss I received was a very sweet one. I remember it even now, though I have had so many since.

"Run away home, little girl," said Miss Lucas. "Take your boat and make the best way back. But send to the doctor as fast as you can. And let him have my note; it will save time."

"And may I come back?" I asked wistfully; "may I come back to be near Roy, and hear what the doctor says?"

"You may come backwards and forwards just as often as you like and as your mother approves," was

Digitized by Google

the answer. "And now go, and don't be afraid. Roy will do very well, and we will take good care of him till you can get back."

I was sure about that. I don't know how it was I was so sure except that I had seen Miss Lucas and her servants already at work. I waited for no more bidding, but raced down to the boat with Chips at my heels. Monk had taken up his position by Roy's couch, and Wuppy was nowhere to be seen. Most likely he had elected to stay with Miss Lucas. He had plainly taken an immense fancy to her; and Roy also was in her house.

The boat was easily pushed off. There was not wind enough to sail; but I took the sculls and began the passage, throwing all my weight and strength into my strokes, yet conscious all the while that I was too shaky and upset to be a very efficient boatman to-day. I braced myself to my task, however, set my teeth, and abused my weakness roundly; yet I felt a great throb of relief when, upon reaching the open water beyond the creek, I heard myself hailed by a familiar voice.

"Why, Cissy, whither away so fast? Where is Roy? And what is the matter?"

The last words were added in a different tone, as my interlocutor, I suppose, caught sight of my face.

"O Nigel!" I cried, "I am so glad it is you. Do help me. Such a dreadful thing! Roy has shot himself—shot his foot. I'm afraid he is badly hurt. I looked once—it was terrible!"

Digitized by Google

Then I fell to shivering again, and the tears which I had held back all this while rushed to my eyes. I put up my hands to try to dash them away, and jerked out the rest of my sentence in gasping breaths.

"I must go home and tell mother; and there is the doctor to be fetched, and I am so tired. Oh, do help me, Nigel! I shall never get across alone."

He was on my boat before I had done speaking. I heard him hail somebody half across the harbour, and then he let his own go adrift as it would. He had the sculls in his hands, and had put me into the stern seat, and the only question he asked of me as he set to sculling with a strength I hardly looked for in him was,—

"Where is Roy now?"

"At The Hermitage. It happened close there. Miss Lucas has taken him in. She has been so good. She has done everything for him. But she says the doctor must come quickly. She has written a note for him. I have it here."

Nigel bent to his task like a trained oar. I had heard of his prowess at Oxford in the boats, but here he generally was to be seen sailing about in a leisurely manner.

"I will land you at home first, Cissy," he said; "and then the tide will take me finely up to Queensbridge —faster than I could get by road. We will soon have Dr. Barton to Roy. Don't be afraid. He will be right

Digitized by Google

enough soon. Accidents like that are always happening in the shooting season, and Roy was always a bit too easy-going with his gun. So long as he is in some house and looked after, that is the great thing. I was afraid he might be lying out in the wood."

"He would have been but for Miss Lucas," I answered, with a little catch in my breath. "But she came out with her servants, and they carried him in. And I'm sure she can't like it, because she doesn't like people coming to her house."

"Perhaps it will be good for her to have to receive angels unawares," answered Nigel with a smile; and then he gave himself up to the task of getting over the crossing as quickly as possible, and spoke no more till he had landed me at our own garden steps.

There I gave him the note to the doctor, and went slowly up the steps of the many terraces. They seemed endless to-day. My limbs ached, and my breath almost failed me before I reached the topmost one. I did not know what had happened to me. I wanted to sit down and cry, but I knew I must not. Mother must be told, and that too, if possible, in such a way as not to startle her. I made my way to her room with a sinking heart.

On my way thither, just as I was mounting the staircase, I encountered Lady Lavender and Hilda. Never had I been so glad to see Lady Lavender. I suppose I was very wild, dishevelled, and tearful in

Digitized by Google

my appearance, for she at once exclaimed with anxious solicitude,—

"My dear child, what is the matter?"

Then, instead of explaining, I began to cry; and I cried so long and bitterly that they took me into one of the nearest rooms, so that mother should not hear, and bit by bit I told my story, which was received with a kindness and sympathy that did something to comfort me.

"My dear, I will go to your mother," said Lady Lavender, as at last I completed my tale; "I will tell your story for you. Your appearance would only alarm her. Hilda shall take you to your room, and look after you. The best thing would be for you to go to bed, and stay there till to-morrow."

"Oh no, no!" I cried; "I must go back to Roy directly!"

"My dear child," said Lady Lavender, in those calmly deliberate accents of hers that I knew so well, "you take my word for it that you will not be permitted to see Roy again to-day. You are not fit for it yourself, and he would not be fit for any further excitement. Whether hurt much or little, he has had a shock to the system, and no doctor will permit a shaken and excited girl to visit him till he has had a night's rest. You may make up your mind to that. You will not be suffered to leave the house again to-day, nor would you gain anything by doing so. Hilda shall stay with you.

Digitized by Google

She shall stay the night, if it will be any comfort; and she will take care of you, and keep you good. Do not force me to appeal to your mother to use her authority. Be a reasonable girl, and let those who know what is for your good guide you in this crisis."

I was beaten, and I knew it. I had never been rebellious to the powers that be, and I knew that mother would back up Lady Lavender. If Roy had been with a stranger, I think I *must* have fought the battle out; but I felt him to be so safe with Miss Lucas that I was able to submit. Indeed, my head was aching so badly that I was not certain of my own ability to cross the water again. I was ready to let Hilda take me to my room, put me on the couch, and bathe my head; glad and thankful to feel that no further responsibility rested upon me, though still in a quiver of anxiety about Roy.

"People don't *die* of things like that, do they, Hilda?"

"Oh no. Why, he is probably only just a little hurt."

"But don't they get lock-jaw sometimes? I'm sure I've heard of such things. Oh, I wish he were not so far away—right across the water! Do you think they would send across if anything bad happened? Oh, I wish I knew that he was all safe still! Could anybody go across and ask?"

The maid came in with some tea for me just then,

Digitized by Google

and Hilda slipped away for a few minutes. But she was soon back, and she came and sat down by me and said kindly,—

"Mr. Hawke has promised to row across, and wait till the doctor has been, and hear what he says. I am sure Nigel will let us have news too; but I told Mr. Hawke that you were anxious, and so he is going. He is very fond of Roy; you may be sure he will do everything that is wise and kind."

I was much relieved to hear this, and still more so when presently we saw Mr. Hawke pushing across in the dinghy to the opposite side of the harbour. My bedroom window looked right out over the harbour, so that we could watch his progress. He disappeared up the creek, but before very long he came into sight again, and I made Hilda run down to the garden steps in order to find out if anything had happened or were wanted.

It seemed that he had come back to fetch certain things for Roy, since it was plainly out of the question for him to be moved for the present. He brought back word that the doctor had not yet arrived, but that the patient was quiet and comfortable. And soon afterwards we saw him pushing back across the water, with a small bag on the seat behind him.

"I like Mr. Hawke," I said to Hilda, as we watched him.

"I think he is splendid," she answered quietly.

Digitized by Google

Now Hilda was not given to superlatives nor to enthusiasms, so that I was a little surprised at the emphasis with which she answered my observation.

"Do you know him, then?" I asked, with sudden curiosity.

"He has been up a good deal at our house with Nigel," she answered gravely. "Nigel is consulting him about a great many plans of his for our people. I have asked him to let me help. I am so tired of doing nothing. We have been talking about it all with Mr. Hawke. I think he knows more than anybody I have ever met. Nigel is clever—a great deal cleverer than I knew till quite lately—but Mr. Hawke is splendid! Oh, if I were only a man, and could do the work that he does!"

"But we can't," I said. "I know what you mean, Hilda. When I hear him and Roy talking together, I have just the same feeling of wishing I could be a man and join them. But girls are so hemmed in. We can do nothing—or only such little silly things they hardly seem to count. I did ask Garth when he was here if there was anything I could do for our people, but he said he had nothing for me; I could ask Mr. Sefton, if I wanted a district or anything like that. Men are so tiresome; they never understand!"

"Not often," answered Hilda. "Nigel put me off just in the same way when I first spoke to him; but I would not be put off. I talked to him a great deal. Gradually

Digitized by Google

he began to understand, and now he is very kind to me. I don't know what it will come to, or whether it will come to anything, but he is thinking a great deal about a number of difficult questions; and he has promised, if he can see his way to anything, to let me help him as far as a woman can. But everything seems so hedged round with difficulties. That is what he and Mr. Hawke talk out together so much. It is very, very interesting, and yet it is rather sad too."

"What is?" I asked with interest, forgetting for a moment my other anxieties, or rather putting them aside for the time being, in order to learn more of Hilda and her ways of thinking.

"Why, the state of the people—the state of the world. Things seem in such a terrible tangle! You know Nigel has house property in a good many places —some in large towns. He has been looking into the state of the people lately, and he is quite horrified. They live like beasts and die like beasts, just getting enough to keep themselves from starvation, and with never a moment to think of anything else. And yet, when you go up a little further, and find men earning good wages, there is a spirit about them so often that is almost more sad than the ignorance of the others. There is such terrible oppression, such terrible wickedness, and such terrible godlessness in the world. And there seem so few to help! And one of the strangest and saddest things is that those who would so gladly, gladly

Digitized by Google

help often cannot, and more often do not know how; and that so very many who do try, and who work might and main and live and die for their brothers, seem in the end to have wrought as much harm as good—sometimes more! It is that which is the terrible part of it. It is almost enough to make one despair; and yet to despair is to do nothing, and that cannot be right."

"Mr. Hawke has work, and he does it," I said; "Roy is always saying what a power he is in Oxford."

"Yes, he has his field. That is where he is to be envied. But I suppose it is the man himself that really makes the opportunity. What Nigel and he have been talking over so earnestly is a project of Nigel's for bringing down here some of the victims of oppression and misery in his other properties, and trying to give them a fresh start under better surroundings. You know he has that large farm between here and Watchet which has been empty for so long. He has to farm it himself, and there are several cottages besides. Then there are people, if he could only find them out amongst the myriads, who have come down in the world from being fairly comfortable once, and who are quite, quite different from the real vagrant, who is a hopeless subject. If he could get some real country-bred people out here who could work the land, manage a dairy, breed and keep poultry, and make nets in the winter months when things were slack, he thinks it might answer, and save just a few here and there from being overwhelmed

Digitized by Google

by the great wave of misery and starvation which is rolling over all great cities. I do not understand all they say when they discuss it. There is a great, great deal to think about, and so many plans of a like kind have ended in failure and fiasco. Nigel will not have it on a charitable basis. He says that nothing is sound that is not self-supporting; but he is quite certain that more could be done with farming if people would try fruit-growing, poultry-rearing, and dairy-keeping. He calls it a disgrace the eggs and butter which are imported into the country, with so much land going out of cultivation for want of labour. Some crops do not pay, and cannot. But he has great ideas about what could be done if people would only be thrifty and managing and thoughtful."

"I didn't know Nigel cared so much about things," I remarked. "He never seems to take much notice, or to care much for what goes on."

"I don't know about that. I think very few people know so well as Nigel what does go on," answered Hilda. "Only Nigel does not talk, and so people get an idea he does not think. But that is a great mistake."

"He is not as clever as Mr. Hawke!" I said quickly.

"Perhaps not," answered Hilda quietly; "but I think he is just as much in earnest, and that goes a long way."

It was interesting to talk with Hilda, because she was

Digitized by Google

in earnest too. In the pauses occupied by speculations concerning Roy, and in scanning the darkening waters of the harbour, I asked a good many things about Nigel's projects—how long they had been seething in his brain, and how soon they were likely to come to anything.

It was with some surprise that I heard he had already almost made arrangements for having a small cottage hospital or home in one of his houses at Fair Haven. That was to be an affair of charity, and was designed to accommodate some six or eight sick or exhausted workers from his other houses in the less favoured localities. He had been working quietly at that plan for some time, and now it was ready to be put into effect. The other and larger scheme was still under debate; but I began to understand that Nigel's life was not one of idle leisure. I never knew before what he did, but I certainly never gave him credit for formulating schemes of benevolence.

But when it grew dark I became restless, and could talk no more. Mr. Hawke had been gone a long while, and might be expected back any minute. My head was better, and I was resolved to go down and wait for him on the terrace. I began to be anxious lest this delay should mean disaster of some kind. Hilda had already arranged to stay the night with me, for which I was grateful; but I could not rest quiet anywhere in the house. I went in for a few minutes to mother, and was satisfied to find her as calm as could be expected. Then

Digitized by Google

I went down to the lowest terrace and waited, waited, waited.

Oh, why were they so long in bringing news? Surely either Nigel or Mr. Hawke might have been back by now. What did it all mean? What was happening to Roy over there on the other side of that black water?

Digitized by Google

CHAPTER VI.

"*SISTER.*"

IT was quite dark before I heard the dip of oars. It had been dark for long, and I was getting into a fever of anxiety and fear. I called out to them as they reached the steps, and asked a dozen questions; but all the answer I got back was from Nigel, who spoke in his provokingly even tones.

"We are coming. We will tell you everything," he said; and I don't know why it was, but from something in his voice I was as certain as possible that he had brought bad news.

I dashed down the steps in time to see Monk leap out of the boat, and come up to me with a sort of pathetic whimper, as if he either offered or appealed for sympathy. He leaned up his head against me as I stood, and thrust his nose into my hand.

Nigel was making fast the boat to the ring in the wall; he and Mr. Hawke got out together.

"Why have you been so long?" I cried. "Something has happened! Why don't you tell me? What of Roy? How can you keep me waiting like this!"

Digitized by Google

I was shivering all over between fear and anger. Something in Nigel's deliberate movements raised an unreasoning gust of passion within me. I was certain he had brought bad news. But why—oh, why could he not deliver it? Anything would be better than this suspense.

He stepped out of the boat, and put his hand on my arm.

"Roy is comfortable, and likely to sleep," he said. "You are making yourself a great deal more unhappy than you need do."

Nevertheless, I was not altogether reassured, but I let Nigel lead me up as far as the lower terrace. I suppose Hilda joined Mr. Hawke, for I was vaguely conscious of voices speaking not far away; but I had no thoughts for them. I was resolved to get at the bottom of the mystery, if mystery there were.

"Why were you so long gone?"

"We waited till the doctors had left. We thought you would not be satisfied without the latest report."

"Doctors! were there more than one? and what ever kept them so long?"

"Now, Cissy, compose yourself, and don't shake all over like that. I tell you beforehand that Roy is doing capitally. He has no pain, and is going off to sleep. Most likely he will sleep quietly all night; and he is in excellent hands. But the injury was rather a severe one. The foot was badly injured; and when the doctors

Digitized by Google

came, they had to remove two toes which had been almost shot off. Now you know everything. I have kept nothing back."

I could not hold back a little cry of horror.

"He will be lame all his life!" I wailed.

"Nothing of the kind," answered Nigel, in those low, even tones of his which I often found irritating, and which yet enforced belief in what he said. "I asked that very question, and was smiled at for it. He will not be lame at all when the injury is healed. Cissy, what are you going to do? Where are you running off to?"

For I had suddenly turned round, and was making for the stairs again.

"I am going to Roy, of course!" I answered, a little wildly. "You can row me across if you like, or I can go alone. Hilda will take care of mother. I must go to Roy."

I had reached the top of the steps before I felt myself arrested by the firm grasp of Nigel's hand upon my arm.

"You are *not* going to Roy," he said, in a voice which sounded strangely inflexible. "Nobody is to go to him for two whole days. That is the doctor's stringent order. Cissy, Cissy, do not be so self-willed and so foolish! Do you think anybody would wish to keep you away unless your presence were a source of danger to the patient?"

"Me a source of danger to Roy!" I cried, struggling

Digitized by Google

between anger and tears, but trembling so violently that I was glad to lean against the parapet, in hopes that Nigel would not see.

"Yes, certainly," he answered. "Do you not know that the first requisite for a patient who has suffered the shock of a rather severe injury and an operation, however successful and slight, is absolute quiet and repose—absolute freedom from excitement. A fit nurse you would make for him as you are now, shaking all over, ready to cry, so excited that you hardly know how to contain yourself. Cissy, Cissy! be sensible, be good! You shall go to Roy the moment your presence will not be in danger of hurting him."

"You say very cruel things," I cried, putting up my hands to dash away my tears, and striving to harden myself against my companion.

"I do not mean to be cruel," he answered; "but I must tell you the truth. Roy could not be in better hands than he is; the doctors say that themselves."

"Do you mean they have brought a capable nurse with them?"

"I mean that they say Miss Lucas and her maids are as capable as any nurses they have ever met, and that she desires no assistance from without. 'So much the better,' Dr. Barton said, when I offered to get a nurse from Exeter or Plymouth, and it was declined; 'Miss Lucas seems to know everything, and can do everything. We can't improve upon her methods. Let well alone, and

Digitized by Google

the boy will do excellently.' That is what Dr. Barton said to me. Who Miss Lucas may be, or where she learned her skill, is her own affair, and no business of ours. All we have to do is to respect her wishes, not to intrude upon her without invitation, nor to seek to force upon her help which she does not desire. You must see that as well as I do, Cissy."

"But—but it seems so strange. Miss Lucas is a sort of invalid herself. How can she take care of Roy?"

"She has two very capable assistants, and no doubt she is better than when she came. Anyhow, she has offered to nurse him, and has declined professional assistance. If her methods succeed, we certainly have no reason to interfere with them. And it is very plain that she knows what she is about. Not only had she written such an intelligent letter to Dr. Barton as to make him bring with him his assistant, his instruments, and chloroform, so that no time was lost; but she had got everything ready by the time he arrived, just as it would have been ready in a hospital ward. Dr. Barton declares she must have been in hospital work at some time of her life. She waited upon them the whole time with that calm precision and helpfulness which nothing but training can give to any one."

This was a new idea about Miss Lucas, but it helped to explain many perplexing things. Perhaps she had been at some time of her life one of that band of devoted women who give themselves to the service of the sick

Digitized by Google

and suffering. I remembered how calm and tender and understanding she had been with Roy, and how cleverly she had had him carried in. She had seemed to know just what to do and how to do it. If she had once been a nurse herself, that explained many things. And had she not got just that beautiful expression which is so often seen upon the faces of those who go much amongst the sick—tenderness, self-control, authority, and gentleness all combined and blended into one? I had noted it in her from the very first. Was this the explanation of it?

But the thought that this might be so stilled the rebellious feelings within me. If Miss Lucas were able to nurse Roy, and had sent word that he was not to be visited just yet, I could not but obey. Perhaps to-morrow I might take the boat and prospect about a little in the hope of seeing her or hearing news; but to-night I must attempt nothing further. It would be wrong as well as foolish.

"Well, if Miss Lucas does not want me," I said reluctantly, for I did not want Nigel to think I was giving in to his authority. I was not. I would have defied him with the greatest pleasure; but I did not want to vex or trouble one who had been such a true friend in need.

"She wants nobody," answered Nigel. "She has taken pains to be very explicit on that point. She will send her gardener over, first thing in the morning, by the ferry, with a bulletin as to the state of the patient.

Digitized by Google

and she will send word in the same way as the day goes on. But she does not wish to be overrun with visitors calling to inquire; and we must respect her desire for privacy, and also remember that, in a house where there are only two servants to do everything, and they have a patient on their hands to see to in addition to their daily work, even the constant answering of the door-bell can become a burden. Miss Lucas has a full right to impose such conditions as she chooses upon us."

"Did you see her yourself?"

"No; only one of the maids—a very sensible and strong-minded specimen of the race, I should say. She was plainly devoted to her mistress, and made it abundantly clear that, although Miss Lucas would do everything for the patient, and that most gladly and willingly, she did not want her privacy invaded by a number of strangers all coming to ask after Roy. She is perfectly right in what she says about the need for perfect quietness for the patient. I have no doubt Roy will do excellently in her care, and we must not be intrusive."

"Miss Lucas will let me in soon, I know," I answered, with confidence; and then I submitted to let Nigel conduct me up the many flights of steps to the house, where supper had been laid out for him and Mr. Hawke, of which they were not sorry to partake.

"You'd better come home with me, Hawke," said Nigel presently, "and finish your visit here when Roy is back again. I've lots to discuss with you still; and you

Digitized by Google

know you've promised us a visit at Eagle's Crag. Come along back with me, and we can send for your things to-morrow. Lady Muriel will spare you, I'm sure, and Cissy will make your excuses."

It was rather nice and considerate of Nigel to suggest this; for, of course, with Roy away a man-visitor in the house would be rather an incubus. Mother was quite pleased to have this arrangement made, and I thought I saw a look of bright interest and pleasure on Hilda's face.

But I was too much wrapped up in Roy to heed anything else very much. Hilda remained that first night with me, but returned home the following day: for, as I explained, I was very poor company; and as Mr. Hawke had gone, there was no need for me to have a companion. I wanted to be with mother as much as possible: for although she had taken the news of Roy's accident very bravely, it had upset her a good deal, and she wanted me with her to tell the whole story again and again; and I was in that restless state when to talk about Roy, and speculate as to what would be going on across the water, was the only thing I cared to do.

Early next morning a little note had been brought to me, and though the rather large, square writing was unknown, I was certain that it came from Miss Lucas, and I tore it open in the utmost haste.

"DEAR LITTLE GIRL" (it ran),—"Roy has had a very

Digitized by Google

good night, and declares himself 'quite well' this morning. But you know he must be kept very quiet for forty-eight hours longer, lest he should get fever. So you must not come either to-day or to-morrow to see him; but after that you may come over at ten o'clock, and stay and have a nice chat. Your little dog Wuppy, who would not go home with your friends last night, lies on the bed, and makes himself very much at home. He and Ross are great friends, and Roy likes to have them with him. Tell your mother that Roy is doing as well as possible, and that he sends his love, and says nobody is to worry about him. Dr. Barton will come and see him this morning, and then will come across to see Lady Muriel and bring the latest report.—Your loving M. L."

I ran with the letter to mother, who devoured it eagerly.

"She writes very kindly. I wish I knew her. I wonder who she is, and why she leads so lonely a life."

"She is very sweet and dear and beautiful," I answered with enthusiasm. "Oh, I wish I had not so long to wait before I might go to Roy!"

Dr. Barton came over before noon, and brought us a most encouraging report, speaking in a fashion of Miss Lucas that made mother more grateful than ever.

"A wonderful woman, Lady Muriel—a wonderful woman! It is not my business to ask her about her-

Digitized by Google

self, but I should uncommonly like to know where she got her training. Not that with her it's training entirely. She's got the natural gift of the born nurse. No training can give that, though it may develop it in unexpected subjects. You may thank her sound sense and knowledge of surgery for saving Roy from a possible danger of blood-poisoning or other kindred ills. If she hadn't taken measures which enabled me to set everything to rights immediately, without the loss of a needless hour, things might have gone differently with him. For Roy is a delicate boy, and has no very great stock of strength to fall back upon. As it is, you will have to be careful of him for some time. He must take things gently—take things gently!"

"But when can we get him home?" asked mother anxiously.

"Oh, don't be in a hurry—don't be in a hurry," answered Dr. Barton. "He couldn't be better off than over there, where all is quiet and restful, and where he is so well looked after. I'd be very sorry to take him out of Miss Lucas's hands till the wound has pretty well healed. Never knew such hands as she has for dressings. Why, the boy hardly winced at her touch; and generally we reckon the first dressing rather a bad bit of business for the patient. He has good pluck, has Roy; but, all the same, it was those hands of Miss Lucas that wrought the charm. Don't you be in a hurry to move him as long as she'll have him."

Digitized by Google

"Yes, that is all very well in one way," said mother, "and I am more grateful to Miss Lucas than I can express. But, after all, she is quite a stranger. What right have I to trespass on her good-will and hospitality longer than is absolutely needful?"

"Well, it is absolutely needful for the present," said Dr. Barton, with a short laugh; "and we'll think those etiquettes over another time. I take the common-sense view of the case. Leave Roy where he'll be best off—and that is under her charge."

He jerked his thumb in the direction of The Hermitage, and that was all mother could get out of him.

The next two days seemed fearfully long, despite the fact that encouraging little notes kept coming across the water. I should dearly have liked to take the boat over and prowl about in the garden, but I thought it would not be quite right after what Miss Lucas had said; and she was being so wonderfully kind to us, that I felt it would be mean to take any sort of advantage of her goodness.

But the long period of waiting came to an end at last, and just as the church clocks struck the hour of ten on both sides of the water, I brought up the dinghy to the garden wall of The Hermitage and made it fast, whilst Monk and I got out. Chips had leaped overboard several minutes before, and was racing towards the house at full speed. He had been much disturbed in mind for the past days by the loss of his master, and

Digitized by Google

had evidently come to the conclusion that he might be found here.

I ran through the shrubbery paths as fast as my legs would carry me, and heard the familiar bark of greeting as Wuppy ran excitedly to meet me. He looked as sleek and well cared for as possible, and was plainly perfectly happy in his self-chosen home, although he received me with great effusion, standing on his hind legs and waving his paws as he had a pretty fashion of doing.

But to-day I could only pause to give him a passing caress. He had to make up for my preoccupation by turning his attentions to Monk, who received them very affably. Chips had disappeared already; probably he had flown straight into the house in search of his master.

I suppose he had already announced our arrival, for in another minute I saw Miss Lucas stepping out from a low French window and advancing towards me with a smile of welcome.

"Well, little girl, punctual to the moment! I thought you would be; and Roy is quite ready to welcome you."

I ran forward—I could not help it—and put my arms round Miss Lucas's neck. I could almost have cried, I was so full of love and gratitude towards her. I felt as though we owed her so much; and how could we ever repay her?

Digitized by Google

She kissed me several times, very sweetly. I felt that I was not rebuffed, but that my advances were understood.

"Poor little girl! Have you been so very anxious and unhappy? But everything has gone as well as possible, and Roy is the best of patients. He has been a very dear, good boy all through. He deserves a visitor to-day for having waited so patiently for the indulgence. Yes, this way. We have not moved him upstairs. He is here in this little room where we first took him. It will make getting out easier when he is well enough for that. Come, and you shall see him."

Miss Lucas moved on just a pace in advance of me. I noted a little change in her dress since I had seen her last. She wore a large white linen apron over her plain black dress, and upon her head the sweetest of goffered caps that could be imagined. It came to a point in front, in the Mary Stuart style; but it was a regular nurse's washing-cap, and she looked simply lovely in it. Seeing her dressed as a nurse, one could well picture her moving about from bed to bed, full of dignity and grace and sweetness. I felt that I should almost enjoy an experience of hospital life if I could be under Miss Lucas, either as patient or assistant.

She walked on before me towards a half-open window, and putting in her head asked softly,—

"Well, my boy, and are you ready for a visitor?"

Then I heard Roy's voice in eager response,—

Digitized by Google

"O Sister, has she come? Send her in! Bring her in! I thought I heard the clocks strike ten just now."

Miss Lucas made a sign to me, and I advanced towards the room. One glance showed me how it had been metamorphosed since last we had been there. A bed had been brought down, and it wore an air of trim daintiness and comfort which invalid beds in private houses by no means always possess. There were flowers in the room, and even pictures, and everything was bright and fresh and sweet. It was not a bit like a dreary sick-room, littered over with medicine-bottles and smelling of drugs. And Roy himself lay against a heap of snowy pillows, looking so bright, so trim, and so well groomed, in spite of his pallor, that I could have cried for joy as I came forward to kiss him, almost afraid to trust my voice lest it should betray the inclination.

"Now I will leave you two children together for half an hour to chatter to your hearts' content.—But don't you excite yourself, Roy, or you will catch it later, I can tell you! Half an hour, and then the dragon will be down upon you!"

"Oh yes, Sister, come back then," cried Roy, with *such* a loving look into her smiling face. "We shall both want you again by that time. Something always happens when you're away. It's only you who can keep everything quite perfect."

"Hear the boy," smiled Miss Lucas; "it's the real Irish blarney coming out. I told him he had Irish

Digitized by Google

blood in his veins long ago. He knows how to use it, too."

She moved away as she spoke, and was gone; and Roy, looking at me with shining eyes, exclaimed,—

"Isn't she sweet!"

"Oh yes, indeed, Roy; but what do you call her?"

"Sister. Don't be jealous, Cissy!" As though I ever should! "I don't quite know how it came about; only sometimes when they were doing things together for me the first days, I used to hear her servants call her 'Sister,' just as though it fell out by accident—for ordinarily they say 'ma'am,' like regular maids. I asked one of them about it, and she smiled, and said that they had worked as nurses under Miss Lucas in hospital once, and that she was always called 'Sister' there, and when there was nursing going on the old name would slip out unawares. I thought it just suited her, and I called her so in my thoughts. And then when she came in to me with her cap and apron, looking just like a picture, it slipped out from me too. I was rather stupid in the head, I think, and it seemed to come so much easier than 'Miss Lucas.' I found she liked it, so I went on; and now I always call her Sister. It's so much nicer. It seems just to suit her."

"She is a darling!" I cried. "I wonder if she would let me call her Sister too? I should so like it."

"I am sure she would. I think she is very loving; and I am sure she has had some great troubles. I can

Digitized by Google

see it in her face, somehow. But she is splendid, and *so* good, and such a nurse! I couldn't make out how she could know all she did till I heard she had been a sister in a hospital; but she must have a great gift as well."

"That is what Dr. Barton said to mother. He thinks everything of her. He says he would give anything to have such a nurse as that under him. She is worth more to a patient than the doctor any day, he said."

I found that we talked much more about Miss Lucas than about anything else during the half-hour we were left alone. After all I had no very great budget of news. Roy wanted to be sure that mother had not been seriously alarmed by his accident, and was interested to hear that Mr. Hawke had gone up to Eagle's Crag.

"The old boy will quite come out of his shell in time if he goes visiting like this. It will do him a lot of good, for he wants to rub off some of his shyness and reserve. He can be himself with men, but with ladies or in mixed society he is generally awfully shut up. But Aunt Joan did him a lot of good, and I think the Lavenders will continue the process. Hilda and he seem to get on, and I have known him talk to you, Cissy."

"Yes, a little. But I am not clever; I so soon don't know what to say. Hilda is different. I like her

Digitized by Google

better every time I see her. She is clever, though she doesn't know it; and she is very much in earnest. I think she may be rather splendid by-and-by, if she gets her chance."

Roy wouldn't talk much about himself, saying there was nothing to tell. He just lay still with his foot under a cradle, and Wuppy divided his time between his bed and Sister's lap. He had taken such an ardent liking for Sister, that Roy gravely doubted if we should ever get him back to the Court again; and Sister evidently had a way with dogs that won all their hearts.

When she came back to us at the end of the half-hour, bearing in her hands a basin of soup that smelt uncommonly good, she had a following of dogs at her heels: Ross and Monk and Wuppy were all in attendance; Chips having taken up his station upon Roy's bed, and from time to time stretching up to lick his master's face or thrust his damp nose into his hand.

"Well, children, and how are you getting on?—Not tired yet, boy?"

"Tired! not I. It's you who ought to be tired, Sister. I've been telling Cissy what a lot you've done for me, and how awfully kind you've been."

"Yes. I've ever so many messages from mother; I don't know how to give them all."

"Then suppose you don't try, but just come away with me into the garden whilst Roy takes his soup and has a little rest, and then you shall come back and

Digitized by Google

finish your chat before you go home with your report."

I moved away to let her come to him with the basin, and I watched her as she just stooped over him, set the bed straight, touched the hair on his brow, and smiled down at him. I saw the look he gave her, so full of loving gratitude. I thought it a very beautiful picture. I did not wonder that Roy liked to call her Sister, and had come to think of her by that name.

"You are so good!" I exclaimed, as she came back to me; and then by a sudden impulse I kissed her again and said,—

"Roy says he always calls you Sister now. Please, may I call you Sister too?"

"Ah yes, little girl, by all means. I like it. It recalls some very happy memories in my life; and all memories are not happy ones, as we learn to know as time goes on."

There was a note of sadness in the voice, and it made me look up and say,—

"I don't think you ought to have any sorrowful memories, you are so very good."

It was perhaps rather a childish way of putting things; but I meant what I said. Sister (for I may as well call her now by the name which thenceforward always seemed to belong to her) gave me a loving, responsive glance, but seemed to draw herself together with a little shuddering sigh.

Digitized by Google

"Ah me! ah me!" she said very softly, and then for a moment there was silence between us.

I could not help it; we were sitting very near together upon a garden seat a little away from Roy's window. I slipped my hand into hers and asked softly,—

"Say you are not unhappy now?"

She did not immediately answer. Her eyes were looking out before her, though I do not think she was taking note of the things they rested on. Neither of us spoke again for some time, and at last Sister said very softly,—

"Not unhappy—that is not the right word now. But there are some things which one can never, never forget!"

I would have given worlds to know more of the trouble of Sister's life, and I think it was not just curiosity that made me want to know it. I think it was a dumb longing to help and comfort her, and how can we comfort when we do not know the source of sorrow?

That, at least, is how I felt. My heart was overflowing with love towards this lonely, beautiful woman, and I was unable to do anything but love her. It was not often that I gave my love completely and unreservedly as I did here and now.

I was not wont to make friendships easily, nor had I had much opportunity. It used to amuse me when year after year Amy Lavender came back with quite

Digitized by Google

a list of new dear friends, all made since last she went away. I used to say rather scornfully to myself that such mushroom loves would have a mushroom life, and deserve it. Yet here was I over head and ears in love with Sister, whom I had to-day seen only for the third time; and although I had good reason for gratitude and affection, the intense personal love I felt towards her was something purely spontaneous and inexplicable.

But Sister would not let me talk about herself. She told me all about Roy, and explained just the nature of the injury and what had been done. She told me that there would be no lameness afterwards, and that he would not think about it at all in walking when once the foot was really well. And from speaking of Roy's case she went on to tell me a good deal of other cases she had seen in hospital at different times, and I listened to her stories with a species of fascination. Things do not sound horrible when they are told quietly by people who have seen and understand such things. As Sister said, in answer to my queries, even very sad and dreadful sights do not overcome those who have duties to do towards the sufferers and know how to do them. She had seen terrible things at different times; but she said that so long as she was busy and had work to do she could always stand it. It was only now and then, at some operation when there chanced to be almost nothing for the nurses to do, that she felt unable to bear the sight. I could understand when she was talking what the

Digitized by Google

doctors here had spoken and felt about her. I wondered how differently everything would have gone had Roy chanced to hurt himself near our house, and been taken there to be tended.

"You are sure you can manage without help?" I asked before I left. "Mother said she was ready to send any number of nurses from wherever you liked."

But Sister lifted her hand with a speaking little gesture.

"We want no help, thank you. Roy shall be well looked after. He is a very good patient, and wants very little. Give your mother my best thanks; but we would rather take care of him ourselves. When nurses have once got the care of a case, they like to nurse it to the end, and have the credit of a good recovery!"

Digitized by Google

CHAPTER VII.

AUNT JOAN.

ON my return home I found the household in a small commotion. There were boxes in the hall; doors stood open, and servants moved quickly to and fro.

"What has happened?" I asked of old James as soon as I caught sight of him; and he answered promptly,—

"Lady Joan Royal has come, miss."

Aunt Joan come! Well, I ought not to have been surprised. It was just the act of prompt kindliness that might have been expected from her. So long as things went smoothly with us, we did not see much of Aunt Joan. She had her own estate to look after, and a great number of irons in the fire. She always found it difficult to get away from home, and said so frankly when invited. But let there be trouble or sickness or anxiety in the house, and Aunt Joan was always to be depended on. It was quite like her to come off without warning when she heard that Roy had met with an accident, and was not able even to be brought home

Digitized by Google

She would believe mother to be eaten up with anxiety, and would be certain to want to be with her to help her through.

Aunt Joan was a few years older than mother, but had character and force which our sweet mother never possessed. They were the only daughters of my grandfather, an Irish peer, who was the last in the title, which at his death became extinct. The land and house in Ireland had been sold; its value had been steadily decreasing, and mother and Aunt Joan had been co-heiresses of what remained. But there was a flourishing little property in England which came to Aunt Joan; for the Earls of Killynacor had had the worldly wisdom to make wealthy English marriages for several generations, and had a good deal of money laid up in this country. The property of Hurst Royal had fallen to Aunt Joan's share in the division, and very ably she managed it. She had never married, although she had been a handsome woman in her youth, and was so still for those who had eyes to see beyond the mere surface bloom of girlhood. She had been almost like a mother to her younger sister when they had been girls together, in spite of the small difference in their ages. Mother always turned to her in times of trouble, and Aunt Joan never failed to respond to the demand made upon her.

As a child I had been afraid of Aunt Joan. Perhaps this was partly because she had been not unfrequently appealed to to impose unwelcome restrictions upon us

Digitized by Google

when mother had been too indulgent to do so. We always submitted to mother, but there were times when her sway had been too mild for our high spirits, when through ill-health or other causes she had not been able to exert her authority, and our governesses or tutors had laid formal complaint against us.

In these cases Aunt Joan had always been summoned, and a fresh code had been drawn up. Aunt Joan was always very just—we never complained on that score—but she was very inflexible too, and naturally we had grown rather into the way of regarding her as a sort of domestic ogress.

That feeling was dying out with the advance of maturer years, and with the consciousness that we had never got more than our deserts from her. But still the old feeling was hard to get rid of, and I never pictured Aunt Joan without a qualm of misgiving. I had not seen her for quite a long time now, for her visits had latterly been the rare occasions when I had been able to leave home for a brief interval, and accept the invitations of Lady Lavender to take a peep at the world in company with her and her daughters.

And now she was actually in the house, and I must go and seek her! I almost smiled at the sense of juvenile trepidation which assailed me as I made my way upstairs.

Yet I was not really afraid of Aunt Joan now. She had been much too good to Roy during his convalescence

Digitized by Google

Digitized by Google

Digitized by Google

at her house. We should have a common subject of interest in our affection for him. It was partly on his account that she had come, no doubt. I hastened upstairs with my budget of news to mother, quite sure that I should find Aunt Joan with her.

I was not mistaken. They were both in mother's room, and Aunt Joan rose with a smile as I appeared, and gave me a hearty kiss of welcome.

"Now tell your mother all about Roy," she said, as I would have tried to speak some words of welcome and thanks. "All the rest will keep; but tell us about Roy and how he is."

"He looks so nice and comfortable, and he says his foot does not hurt at all; and Sister—I mean Miss Lucas—is *so* good to him. She has been a nurse—Dr. Barton was quite right; and it makes everything different when she is there. Roy sent lots of love to you, mother—he didn't know about Aunt Joan, of course—and he said you were not to worry the least bit in the world. He is quite happy, and waited on like a prince. You are not to be the least anxious or anything. And really if you had only seen how nice and comfortable he looked, you would not."

"But can't he be got home, if he is so well?" was Aunt Joan's natural query.

"Dr. Barton would not hear of it," said mother quickly; and I answered almost in the same breath,—

"Oh, I don't think it would do at all. He is only so

Digitized by Google

comfortable because Sister is such a splendid nurse. It would be all different here."

Aunt Joan looked at us with a surprise in her eyes that was quite natural.

"And who is this wonderful Miss Lucas—or Sister—or whatever you call her? And how has she managed to bewitch you all, from Dr. Barton downwards?"

"Oh, if you could only see her with Roy, you would understand all about it." I answered. "And she has been a nurse—she was a hospital sister once; that's why we call her Sister. She likes it, and it seems just to suit her. Nobody could help seeing how splendid she is."

Aunt Joan smiled, but looked reassured.

"Oh, if she has been a trained nurse, that explains a good deal; but who is she, and what is she doing at Fair Haven?"

Aunt Joan looked at mother, and mother shook her head.

"You know I cannot pay calls now, dear Joan. I have never seen Miss Lucas; but Roy and Cissy have scraped acquaintance, and they say she is charming."

"And our good friend Lady Lavender?" queried Aunt Joan, with a subdued smile in her eyes.

That smile gave me sudden confidence, and I spoke eagerly and rapidly.

"Aunt Joan, you may as well know first as last. Lady Lavender has not called, and will not call. She thinks it very strange that Miss Lucas wants to live so

Digitized by Google

quietly, and does not go out, and does not want to see strangers. She says there must be a mystery about her, and she does not approve of that kind of thing. I think it is a shame to talk like that, just because somebody comes down ill and tired, and likes to be quite quiet. But you know what Lady Lavender is like, and she is so frightened for her dear girls."

Unconsciously I had spoken the last two words in a tone imitating the slight drawl of Lady Lavender. Roy and I so often did it that the habit had become rather too confirmed. Mother's hand went up in a moment in a warning gesture, for she never permitted this sort of pleasantry in her presence; and though I thought I caught an answering gleam in Aunt Joan's eyes, she only said in her slightly incisive way,—

"It is not a bad rule to learn something about a new neighbour before you call. It may perhaps be pushed too far, but there is sound sense in the practice. One cannot tell by second-sight if a new-comer is to be welcomed or not."

"Well, it is Lady Lavender's loss, not Miss Lucas's, that they do not know each other," I replied, with a certain defiance in my mental attitude. "Lady Lavender will have to know now that Miss Lucas is our friend; but, O Aunt Joan, don't let her turn mother against her! You be on our side, do! I don't care whether it is quite proper or not. I love Miss Lucas —I do indeed—and I am sure she has had a great

Digitized by Google

deal of trouble. I can't bear the thought of turning our backs upon her. I couldn't do it—I really couldn't!"

"Well, child, and who suggested you should?" quoth Aunt Joan, with her quick, flashing smile. "You need not get into such a state of mind over a most improbable contingency. Miss Lucas has shown herself a kind friend at a critical time. We all owe her a debt of gratitude. It is not very likely that we shall repay that debt by turning our backs upon her, as you put it. Come and show me my room, and let me hear about the mischance. Your mother must rest a little now, and I have hardly made your acquaintance yet. You were a little girl in short frocks when last I saw you, with a mane of hair hanging down below your waist. Now your hair has gone up and your dresses down. I hardly know this new niece."

I was very willing to accompany Aunt Joan to her room, and to help her to unpack. Aunt Joan seldom travelled with a maid; indeed she made very little use of that individual at home for personal service, being a lady of independent and vigorous habits. As I moved about the room, answering questions and telling my story, I took mental notes of Aunt Joan all the while, and I came to the conclusion that if I could but get rid of my youthful ideas regarding her, and make an altogether new picture of her, it would be a much more true and favourable one.

Digitized by Google

For Aunt Joan was not stern or hard or disagreeable in any way, neither was she masculine or unwomanly. Also, she was a good deal better looking than I had believed, and her manner had a crisp, bracing decision about it which was rather invigorating and refreshing—after Lady Lavender.

Aunt Joan was rather tall and rather thin, and her face was brown with exposure to all weathers. For as Roy had told me, and as I remembered too, Aunt Joan was a great gardener, and something of a farmer too, and occupied herself about her garden and estate at all seasons, and whatever the weather might be. Everything indoors and out was superintended by herself, and it was perhaps because of this that Hurst Royal was always in such a flourishing condition. There were an alertness of manner and a quick resolution of speech about her which marked her as a woman of action; and yet her laugh was ready and full, her voice low-toned and pleasant, and altogether I began to find that Aunt Joan was by no means lacking in that indefinable quality of charm which was so very visible in our mother, but which I had not hitherto believed my redoubtable aunt to possess.

Mother did not come down to luncheon, so Aunt Joan and I were alone.

"Tell me all the news of the place," she said. "I was here two years ago, though I did not see you. I must get into touch with things again, for your mother

Digitized by Google

is resolved upon keeping me for a spell, and it is perhaps time that I should stay with her again. I must go back to Hurst Royal though before long and set my house in order; but I have promised to come back afterwards and stay for a month or six weeks."

I felt quite glad to hear that, although two hours ago I do not think I should have done so.

"Can you leave Hurst Royal then, Aunt Joan? I thought you were always so busy there?"

"Yes, child, so I am; but the claims of flesh and blood come before those of live stock and flowers! As we grow older we find that the ties of kinship mean a great deal. It does not do to let them become loosened by time and other interests. Your mother and I stand very much alone in the world. But for her and for you, I have nobody of my own kindred to care for. We must not grow up strangers to each other. And you are growing of an age, Cissy, to need somebody to take you out. Your mother cannot, and even a brother is hardly a suitable escort in society."

"O Aunt Joan, but it would be such a trouble for you to go about with me!" I cried; for I had an idea that Aunt Joan did not much care for social gatherings, and thought them rather a waste of time. I realized her kindness in thinking of me like this, but I did not like her to sacrifice her own tastes and habits for my sake.

"Nonsense! nothing is a trouble when it comes in

Digitized by Google

the way of duty. You cannot live always like a nun, and your mother is not able to take you about."

"No, but there is Lady Lavender," I began; and then Aunt Joan broke into a sudden laugh.

"Do you want to go everywhere in Lady Lavender's train, Cissy my dear?" she asked; and I suddenly cried out almost hotly,—

"No, I don't, Aunt Joan! I would rather not go out at all. But I always thought I should have to. Oh, it would be much, much nicer to go with you!"

"And much more suitable," said Aunt Joan quietly. "Well, it will come to that this next winter. I intend to look after you all here, and go backwards and forwards to Hurst Royal. The journey is not a long one, fortunately, and I can amuse myself here by getting your gardens into better order. I can see lots of things that want doing, even from here!"

"I wish you'd teach me about flowers and things," I said; "for indeed, Aunt Joan, I do begin to want something to do—something useful I mean. Of course I am useful to mother, and she likes me with her a good deal; and when Roy is at home the days run by so fast that I have hardly time to think about it. But all the same, I begin to have the feeling that I am doing nothing with my life except enjoy it. I don't think it's wrong to be happy and enjoy things, as some good people do, but I want something more. I don't want everything to be just myself, myself, myself all the time through.

Digitized by Google

I'm not clever, and I'm not very old, and of course I don't want to go away and turn nurse or nun, or anything like that, but I want to feel that I am doing something for other people. Aunt Joan, do you know what I mean?"

Aunt Joan's face was so very kind in its expression that I at once felt her to be a beautiful woman, although, perhaps, the casual observer would not know it.

"I know exactly what you mean, child," she said; "and I am very glad to hear you say it."

"But is there anything I can do?"

"There is always something for each of us to do; we have only got to find it."

"That is just the trouble so often."

"Yes, quite true, especially at starting; for it is a very dangerous and fallacious doctrine which is getting so much in vogue now, that girls have 'vocations' which take them away from home life and home duties, and throw them into surroundings for which they are often quite unsuited. The vocation of the average girl is to stay where Providence has placed her, and do the duties which belong to that place. It is only the few who really receive the call to leave their homes and go forth. So, at least, I believe; else why are we set in our places in families at all? If we have open eyes and a ready, willing heart, we can often find work all unsuspected before lying ready to our hand. But if it does not come to us, and we have to go out and seek it, it is very

Digitized by Google

seldom that it lies far away. Generally there is plenty waiting for us at our very doors."

"Then, Aunt Joan, please help me to find some, for I have never found it for myself."

Aunt Joan looked at me in a fashion I did not quite understand. She had very beautiful eyes, dark grey, with sometimes just a dash of green in their depths, and sometimes a glint of blue—eyes rather like the sea of our harbour, which changed its colour with the changing clouds above. There was something like the shadow of a smile lurking in them now as she said,—

"I am not certain, from what you have said, that you have not found some for yourself already, without any aid from me."

"O Aunt Joan, what do you mean?"

"Have you not found somebody who is lonely and sorrowful? and have you not offered her sympathy and love?"

"Oh!" I cried, in surprise at the notion. "Do you mean Sister, Aunt Joan?"

"Sister—Miss Lucas—whichever you like to call her. Yes, Cissy, I mean just that."

"Oh, but that is all the other way! It is so good of her to let us come; and now she is taking care of Roy. It is not work to go and see her; it is just pure pleasure!"

"And is your idea of work something that is of necessity disagreeable?"

Digitized by Google

"I—I—well, yes, I think so. Isn't it generally?"

"It has not been my experience. I think I am always happiest when I am hardest at work."

"But then your work is work—Roy has told me about you. To go and see Sister and talk with her is nothing but pleasure."

"Perhaps so; but if you are bringing a ray of sunshine into a clouded life, is not that worth doing?"

"Yes, oh yes; but I don't think I am."

"I am not sure. I think everybody who brings love brings the sunshine too."

I turned these words eagerly over in my mind, and exclaimed,—

"Oh, if I could only think that!"

It was a delicious thought that I could help to cheer Sister—that Roy and I could do anything for one who had done so much for us. But was it possible that we could? I did not feel so confident of that as Aunt Joan; and yet she knew so much more than I!

"Aunt Joan, will you come and see Sister to-morrow?"

"I certainly intend to call and ask if she will see me," said Aunt Joan. "As your mother's sister and representative I can do no less. But whether I shall do more than this depends entirely upon herself. I shall never intrude upon the privacy of any person who desires to live apart and alone. Miss Lucas may have a hundred good reasons for the course she has taken, and it would be very unwarranted on our part to try to disturb

Digitized by Google

her. She has admitted you and Roy to a certain intimacy; we must be content with that if she desires no more."

"Aunt Joan, I think you are a very nice person!" I exclaimed, with sudden enthusiasm; and Aunt Joan's laugh rang out as she rose and said,—

"Come, let us go into the garden; I want to look at the fruit-trees. I had them all pruned in hard when I was last here, but I suspect they want the knife again now. It is one of the things I find gardeners most afraid of—using the knife to fruit-trees; and they would get so much more fruit if only they would cut to better purpose! My knife and the watering-pot—those ought to be my badges. I hardly ever go into a greenhouse where I do not long to have the one in my hand, nor visit a walled garden without my fingers tingling for the other."

So Aunt Joan and I made a circuit of the gardens, and Aunt Joan's knife came out many times as we went. We got hold of the gardener, too, and they had a tremendous long talk together. Aunt Joan had the happy knack of never hurting the feelings or putting up the back of the professional gardener, even whilst criticizing his methods and instructing him in better ones. She and our gardener were friends of long standing, and talked and passed their little jokes with perfect urbanity. I often wished that I had one tithe of the knowledge Aunt Joan had, or her marvellous powers of observation.

Digitized by Google

My eyes, I flattered myself, were pretty sharp, but what Aunt Joan saw was something wonderful. It was an education to be with her, as Roy had said on his return. I remember I had pulled an incredulous face on hearing him remark this, but I was beginning to understand it myself now.

Before we had finished the garden Lady Lavender was announced, and we had perforce to go in again. News of Aunt Joan's arrival had doubtless reached Eagle's Crag, and our neighbour had hastened down to pay her respects. She had brought Hilda with her, and we two girls soon slipped out into the garden together, and went down to the lowest terrace, where we could be by ourselves. Hilda wanted to hear all about Roy the first thing, but she had some interest of her own on hand too, as I could plainly see; and when I had exhausted my budget of news, she burst out with hers.

"O Cissy, they are going to begin the cottage hospital and home almost directly. The house is all ready, and Nigel has said that I may help about the furnishing of it."

"Where is the house?" I asked, all interest at once; for who could tell but that I might find the very work I was wanting in connection with this cottage home or hospital?

"Oh, don't you know? No, I suppose not. Nigel has been so very quiet over it till all the plans were made. Well, it is that long, low house with a sort of veranda,

Digitized by Google

not far from the church, and with the garden sloping down and looking over the sea, with only a few rows of cottages between, lower down the hill, and a winding lane running down to the quay. It belongs to Nigel, but lately it has not let readily. It is not a poor man's house, and yet it does not attract better-class tenants, because of the cottages and the openness of the garden. They all want such a lot done to it that Nigel has not cared to enter into negotiation with them. So it came into his head to make it into something between a cottage hospital, a convalescent home, and a home of rest for his poor people in the towns, who can never get a breath of pure air or a holiday from their work from year's end to year's end."

"That sounds very nice, Hilda."

"Doesn't it? I went to see the house yesterday. Nigel and Mr. Hawke were going, and they took me. It is bigger than you would think; there are quite a number of rooms, and most of them look out over the sea; and the sunset lights are beautiful, just what you get from here, only the house is higher up, and one cannot get down to water-level without leaving the garden. Nigel has built a little separate block for the resident superintendent, and he means to have a real lady nurse to look after everything. It's not to be a regular cut-and-dried affair. Sometimes the people will be ill, but some only in need of rest, or people who have been in hospital and are turned out, but are not fit for work

Digitized by Google

till they have got stronger. Dear old Trethwick is to look after the garden, and take a sort of care of the men inmates when they come. His cottage is next to the house, and he is delighted with the plan, and it will be a labour of love to him. He is such a good old man. I am sure he will do good to all who come. It was quite beautiful to hear him and Mr. Hawke talking together. I could have listened to them for hours. O Cissy, what a wonderful man Mr. Hawke is!"

Hilda's face quite shone with enthusiasm over the plan or the man, I hardly knew which. I was keenly interested in the thought of the new home. Why had Nigel said nothing about it till everything was ready?

"I think it is his way. He is very quiet over what he does. Perhaps it is better so. Nigel and Mr. Hawke both have something almost approaching horror for that sort of fashionable benevolence which patronizes everything new, and then perhaps takes up something else and forgets the first claim. Nigel was afraid of being inundated with offers of bazaars or concerts in aid of the scheme; and if he has a horror of anything, it is of these ways of raising money. Mr. Hawke is just the same. He says he wishes there were no such thing as subscription lists. He says that if the Church—I mean the whole Christian Church of the world—had been faithful, and kept 'the unity of the faith in the bond of peace,' everything would and could and should have been done through her. Offerings ought to be

Digitized by Google

made at the doors of the churches Sunday by Sunday for everything—nobody knowing what his neighbour does, but all giving liberally as God has prospered them, without a thought of what their fellow-men would say, but doing so for God and known only to Him. If that were done, and if that spirit prevailed, and if there were a church holy and unspotted and undivided to distribute these funds, then we should have no need of these paltry devices for raising money, nor of the lists which induce so many to give, not for love of God or their brethren, but that men may know what they do, and praise their generosity."

Hilda was quite excited. It was plain that she had been hearing and thinking and learning a great deal lately. I liked to hear her talk when she grew animated and threw off her crust of reserve. What she said sounded very beautiful in theory, but it did not seem to me very practical or practicable with the world and the Church as they are now.

"No, that is just it," she answered with a long sigh; "everything has got into a terrible tangle, and it is often very hard to see the right way out of it. However, as Mr. Hawke says, we can each of us try our best to do things in God's way, and not man's. And perhaps that is why Nigel has been so quiet and silent about his work; for, do you know, Cissy, I never thought about it before, but I have found out that Nigel is a very devout man, really. I don't mean goody-goody

Digitized by Google

—I need hardly say that, for one could not imagine such a thing of him—but really caring for those things, thinking of them, making them the rule of his life. O Cissy, I don't care what people say; but when you do find men like that, they are quite, quite different from others! Think of the difference between Mr. Clarence and Mr. Hawke! Don't you know what I mean? It isn't that I have anything against the one. I like him in a way, and I try to like him more; but there is a something one cannot get over. One knows him up to a certain point, and there it stops short. I suppose I know Mr. Hawke much less. I have only known him quite a short time, and have not seen him very often; but I could trust him through everything, and know he would do right. It is a beautiful thing when you once see it. And I believe Nigel is like that too, though until lately I have never thought about it."

"Or perhaps he takes his colour from Mr. Hawke. I think Nigel is rather like that—not much character of his own, but borrowing from the people he is with."

I had always been accustomed to speak out frankly to the Lavender girls, and when boys and girls have grown up from childhood together they do criticize one another pretty candidly; but I met a glance from Hilda's eyes which made me feel that perhaps I had gone too far, and I said hastily,—

"You don't mind my saying so, do you?"

"Oh no! I don't mind your saying anything to me.

Digitized by Google

We have always been outspoken. I was only thinking how odd it was that you could never do justice to Nigel."

"Don't you think I do?"

"No, or you could not have said that. Nigel has an indolent manner, and I know he irritates you often. Once he used to irritate me; but he does not now, since I understand him better. Yet I don't think at any time in my life I could ever have made such a blunder as to think Nigel lacking in character, or easily influenced by those about him. Don't you remember we used to call him 'the inflexible,' even when we were children."

"Yes; but that was because he was the eldest, and lorded it over us," I answered, for I had not forgiven Nigel for his behaviour the other night. Of course he had been right to hold me back from an absurd errand, but his quiet authority of word and manner rankled still. "It is easy to be Lord High Everything when there are only girls and little boys to deal with!"

Hilda turned away with a little gesture that smacked of impatience.

"You don't understand, or you won't understand!" she said quickly; and as I did not care to pursue the theme, I got her back to the subject of the cottage hospital, which occupied us both till we heard the summons from above, and Hilda was carried off in the train of her mother.

Digitized by Google

CHAPTER VIII.

CONVALESCENCE.

"NO, child; I go by the proper way and at proper hours," said Aunt Joan, in her decisive way. "You shall take me across in the boat this afternoon, and I will pay my call, whether Miss Lucas sees me or not. You can do as much prowling about at odd times as you like; but when I pay a first call, I do it in a becoming manner. What is excusable in young folks is a liberty in their elders."

I suppose Aunt Joan was right; but I had planned taking her to the Hermitage by the garden wall, and just bringing her face to face with Sister, leaving the two to make friends together (as I felt sure they must do) whilst I went and chatted with Roy indoors.

I was not nearly so confident of her reception if she went as a caller; but when Aunt Joan said a thing she meant it, and I did not attempt another word. Nor would I go across that morning myself. I thought perhaps it would be better that Sister should know nothing beforehand of Aunt Joan's arrival. Of course Roy would

Digitized by Google

have told her about Aunt Joan; he would talk of her and Hurst Royal naturally enough, since he had been there so recently. I thought there would be more chance of Miss Lucas's being willing to see her if she came unexpectedly than if notice had been given.

There was a brisk breeze blowing, and I soon had the boat across when the afternoon really came. I was uncertain whether to go in myself or not, but decided to wait and see what reception was given Aunt Joan. She promised if she saw Sister to let her know that I was there, and if she thought Roy would like me to come in, I would go directly I received the signal.

I had a sort of feeling that I had better not be there if a meeting took place. I knew by instinct that Sister was strangely shy and shrinking when brought face to face with any unknown person. I thought if anybody could set her at ease it would be Aunt Joan, and that even my presence as a silent spectator might cause a certain restraint between them. I had great hopes that Sister and Aunt Joan would draw together by some mysterious process, and that Sister would thenceforth be our friend.

I landed Aunt Joan at the ferry steps, close by the road which led up past the gate of The Hermitage; then I pushed back into the water, and waited idly in my boat for what might happen next. Perhaps Aunt Joan would return almost immediately, having failed to see the mistress of the house; or perhaps I should re-

Digitized by Google

ceive a message or signal to come up myself; so I kept my eyes fixed upon the bend in the road, from which point the messenger must come.

Nothing, however, happened. Nobody came near me, and Aunt Joan did not return. That at least was satisfactory. She had obtained admission to The Hermitage. She had probably seen Sister. How I wondered what was going on there! But I had to exercise my patience for a considerable time; for I suppose it must have been quite half an hour before I saw Aunt Joan's tall, active figure reappear and walk swiftly down the road to the steps, where I had already pushed up the boat in waiting.

"Well?" I said, immediately we had got off.

"Well, I have seen Roy. He had a little headache about him, so that we thought one visitor enough for the day. You are to go to-morrow; but we must not come crowding too many at once. He sent his love, and declares he is doing famously; but he is not a robust subject, and we must have patience."

"He is not worse?" I asked quickly.

"No, not the least. His foot is going on famously, and he is in excellent hands; but he has not the reserve of strength that most boys have at his age. He has only just got over one severe illness, and this will, of course, be the more felt."

"And you saw—Miss Lucas?"

"Oh yes; we had a good long talk together before

Digitized by Google

I went to Roy. He was sleeping, and we did not wish to wake him."

I was burning to ask questions as to that interview, but all I ventured to say was,—

"Isn't she kind and sweet?"

"Very; we owe her a great debt of gratitude, although she does not like to hear it said."

"Isn't she a splendid nurse?"

"Evidently; one can see that at a glance. And Roy cannot praise her enough!"

I rowed on in silence for a while then, and Aunt Joan sat looking thoughtfully at the water. I wished I knew what was passing in her mind. She was certainly more grave than when we had gone. And yet Roy was no worse—getting on well.

Curiosity presently prompted another leading question.

"Aunt Joan, you liked Miss Lucas, did you not?"

"Very much, Cissy. I do not wonder that you have fallen in love with her. At your age I might have done the same."

"O Aunt Joan, I am so glad you understand! You will be on our side about going to see her? You won't let Lady Lavender persuade mother that we ought not!"

"You are a little goose, Cissy," returned Aunt Joan, laughing. "You seem to think your mother has no will of her own, and is ruled in all things by Lady Lavender. You are very much mistaken."

Digitized by Google

"But indeed she does go a good deal by what she says."

"That may be. Lady Lavender goes out into the world, and has daughters to bring up, and naturally your mother takes counsel with her. But they by no means agree in every point; and now that you are grown to woman's estate, you will not find your mother backward in granting you the measure of liberty in action and thought which is suitable and desirable. If you want to make a friend of Miss Lucas, I am sure you will meet no hindrance from your mother."

"Not if you like her too, Aunt Joan."

"I do like her. But she did not ask me to renew my visit. She took it as meant for Roy more than for herself, and I shall not attempt to seek to establish an intimacy that may not be desired. What motive or reason Miss Lucas may have for living a very retired life for the present I do not know, nor do I wish to know unless she were eager to tell. I have no doubt at all that her reason is a sufficient one, and that it should be respected. Circumstances have arisen which have broken into her routine, and she seems willing and pleased to take you two children into her heart, which I am sure is a big one. As I told you before, Cissy, this may be one of those opportunities thrown in your way of doing good and bringing healing all unknown to yourself. Miss Lucas is a woman who is sorrowful to the heart. I think she has received one of those wounds

Digitized by Google

which it is almost impossible to heal. You may be able in some measure to cheer and comfort her. Love will go a long way when it is spontaneously offered. Circumstance — Providence perhaps — has thrown you across her path. It is for you to make the most of your opportunities, without forcing yourself or seeking unbidden confidences."

I pondered long on Aunt Joan's words. Could it be possible that I could do anything to cheer or comfort Sister? I could love her—love her with my whole heart; I did it already. But it seemed impossible that that could do anything. She must have been loved by so many, so very many! I thought that nobody could see her without loving her. What could I do more than those whom she had nursed and tended?

Still there was joy in the thought and in the hope; and next day I went to Roy, but not empty-handed; for I took flowers and fruit with me, which we all shared together, sitting in his room, with the windows open, and the soft September air blowing in upon us.

It was a beautiful season that year. September in our southern home is generally almost a summer month, and this year it was so hot and bright it was hard to believe how soon the autumn days would be upon us.

We made the dogs race for sticks, and put them through their different tricks. Sister was teaching Wuppy all sorts of little accomplishments; she had a wonderful power over dogs, and they would obey her

Digitized by Google

with marvellous readiness. She seemed to have the knack of making them understand her, and she never had to speak severely or angrily to them to train them in obedience. Wuppy had so attached himself to her that I doubted whether we should ever get him back home again. It could hardly have been for Roy's sake that he stayed; it must have been for his love to Sister.

She was very fond of him too, and called him her "dear wee man." I almost hoped that she would take him as a gift when Roy left, for he had pretty little caressing ways towards her that were very engaging. He had shown them at home, but not to the same extent. He was to be seen running at her heels the whole day long, and whenever she sat down he would curl up at her feet or clamber upon her knee.

Day by day I came to visit Roy, and day by day I fell more and more deeply in love with Sister. She was so gentle, so sweet, and yet in her quiet way she was full of fun, and we enjoyed many a hearty laugh together. Still one could never forget that behind all this softness and brightness there lay the shadow of an unquenchable sorrow. Now and then it would look out through her beautiful eyes in a glance inexpressibly pathetic. Sometimes it would show itself in that little shivering sigh of which I have made mention, or betray itself in some little word or phrase dropped almost unconsciously.

And then one began to notice, as we knew her better,

Digitized by Google

how little it was that we did know. She did not seem reserved with us. I am sure she loved us, and liked us to be with her. We talked to her about our own past life and our little interests and affairs with perfect freedom, and she listened with unfailing interest; but she never spoke of her own past, except when she told us stories of hospital life, which we always found intensely interesting.

About her life as a nurse she had no reservations. We knew at which hospital she had been trained, where she had been Sister so long, and where she had acted as superintendent, till her health had broken down, and she had come to The Hermitage for rest and refuge, bringing with her two of her most tried and faithful nurses, who were also in need of rest, and preferred any sort of life to the necessity of being parted from Sister.

We were very fond by this time of these two faithful women, and we called them Nurse Lloyd and Nurse Bradley. They did not seem like common servants, nor were they. Nurse Lloyd was young, and she had lots of character and go in her. She had been in several hospitals, and in one lunatic asylum. Some of her stories about her experiences with lunatics made our flesh creep. She had had a few narrow escapes for her life, as many of the attendants have; for though they always carry a whistle with them, and though when the sound of that whistle is heard every attendant or nurse passes it on, and a nurse from each ward runs

Digitized by Google

to the assistance of the person in danger, yet so sly and so fierce are some of the dangerous lunatics, that help often arrives no more than in time.

"It's best to humour them when you can," Nurse Lloyd would say. "I was once shut up with a man who wasn't thought actually dangerous, though he had to be watched pretty sharply. A man had him most times, but I used to relieve him when he went to dinner. The window of the room was barred, of course; but the fellow had got a bar loose sometime, and he suddenly wrenched it out and opened the window, and told me to jump out. He wanted to see somebody take a good jump. It would be such fun, as he said; for the jump was a good fifty feet on to the flags of the yard below. I suggested he should try it himself first; but he didn't seem to think that would be the same fun. I knew he could pitch me out as easily as if I had been a baby, and there was a nasty look in his eyes. I didn't even dare to use my whistle. I wasn't sure it would be heard, and I knew if I did he would spring at me. So I went to the window and looked out, pretending to have a joke about it, but afraid every minute I should feel him upon me, lifting me over the sill. Then a thought came into my head, and I said, 'It's a fine jump down, and it would be great fun to see anybody take it. I'll go if you like; but don't you think it would be funnier still if I were to go down into the court and *jump back?*' Somehow the idea pleased him. He

Digitized by Google

rubbed his hand and said 'Yes;' so I got out of the room, and glad enough was I to turn the key upon him. But I was half afraid then that he'd have thrown himself out before I could get the men warders to go to him."

"It must be very horrid to be with mad people," I said, with a shiver of horror. "I wonder any nurses are ever found for the work."

"Well, it doesn't do to stay too long at it; we all find that after a bit," answered Nurse Lloyd. "I stood it as well as most; but I had to give it up at last. It gets on one's nerves those long corridors with doors on both sides, and never knowing that somebody won't spring out at you before you've got along. It doesn't happen often, but often enough to scare you more than you care for. Doctors find it bad coming to and fro; but for nurses who are always with them—well, it doesn't do to stay too long."

Nurse Lloyd had been in a small-pox hospital, too, so she had seen plenty of gruesome sights in her day; but for all that she was a bright-spirited, lively woman, of whom one soon got really fond, and her devotion to Sister was beautiful to see.

Mrs. Bradley was a much older woman, and a good deal quieter. She filled the cook's place in the house, and was enjoying the quiet of the life after a rather hard experience of long years of nursing. She also had plenty of stories to tell when the mood was on her.

Digitized by Google

The last years of her hospital life had been as ward sister where Sister had been superintendent. But she was growing too old for the arduous life, and had saved a little competence. When Miss Lucas gave up and retired on account of her health, these two devoted women came with her, Nurse Bradley partly on her own account certainly; but I verily believe the younger woman came out of pure love and devotion to one who might need skilled tendance and nursing.

It came into my head sometimes, when we were getting Nurse Lloyd to tell us tales of her hospital life, what a splendid person she would make for the management of the cottage hospital Hilda was always talking about. She was not a lady, it is true; but she was a thoroughly sensible, capable, refined woman, large-hearted and devoted—one who would bring a vast amount of skill and experience to the task, and might well win the respect and affection of all who came under her care.

"It would be capital," said Roy, to whom I once mentioned my idea, "only I do not think she would ever leave Sister."

Roy was much interested in the proposed scheme of the hospital, and talked a great deal about it with me and with Sister too. She told us things which I repeated to Hilda, and she passed on to Nigel; and one day he came to me and said,—

"Look here, Cissy: do you think Miss Lucas would allow me to call upon her, just upon business, you know,

Digitized by Google

to ask her a few questions about this thing? It seems to me she knows everything that is perplexing us, and that half an hour's talk with her would be worth folios of letters with unknown authorities in London, with whom I have been corresponding latterly."

I looked a little doubtfully at Nigel. Somehow—I admit the thought was an unworthy one—I felt a reluctance to think of sharing Miss Lucas in any way with him. She seemed by that time to belong to Roy and me. We knew her, and nobody else did. I felt a kind of triumph in that, and it was a privilege I did not wish to forego. I had not been jealous of Aunt Joan's single call. It had had satisfactory results. But I did not particularly desire to see Nigel there. It seemed a sort of breaking in upon our enchanted princess, and I was not without a qualm of jealousy where Sister was concerned.

"I'm sure I don't know," I answered, rather coldly. "You know Miss Lucas does not see people. And Lady Lavender has never noticed her in any way—not even left a card. I don't exactly see how you could go."

I confess I rather enjoyed planting this little sting. Lady Lavender had been slightly hurt—"offended" is perhaps too strong a term to employ—at our having established an intimacy in a house she had not thought it desirable to call at. It was a subject never named even between herself and mother; but we all knew that it was rather a sore one with her. Of course Roy's

Digitized by Google

accident accounted for much; but our neighbour had not liked the whole thing, and she had continued to stand perfectly aloof, and inquired after Roy only as a matter of duty, passing on to some other topic immediately, as though to intimate that she did not want to discuss him or his surroundings.

I honestly think now that she believed no beautiful and comparatively young woman would seclude herself as Sister was doing unless there had been something in her past of which she was ashamed. Lady Lavender's life had run all in one groove, and she was not gifted with the imaginative faculty; so perhaps she had some excuse for her view of the situation.

Anyhow I rather enjoyed my retort to Nigel; though he always took things so quietly that one could not tell whether he felt the sarcasm or not.

"I think Miss Lucas might be willing to see me on a matter of business," he answered. "I am sorry that my mother did not call when she first came here; but now that we know her wish for seclusion, it would perhaps be hardly a courteous act to do so. Nevertheless, I believe she would be willing to answer me a few questions, and accord me a personal interview. If you do not like to ask her, I will write to Roy—or to her direct."

"Oh, I will ask, if you like," I answered. "I daresay Miss Lucas will see you. But it seems to me rather much to ask after the way—"

I stopped short, leaving my sentence unfinished. I

Digitized by Google

had caught a look in Nigel's eyes which showed me I was wrong in criticizing his mother to him. He might not approve of her action, but he would not stand by and hear others fall foul of it. I think I respected him for that. I know I would not have heard a word spoken against my mother, although I did not profess to think her judgment infallible.

I spoke to Roy about Nigel's wish almost at once. He looked interested and alert.

"I am sure she would see him—I am sure she would let him come. I think people get rather exaggerated views about Sister. She came here very much out of health. She has suffered a great deal both in mind and body. She fancied this would be a sort of end-of-the-world place, where she could find rest and peace, with nobody to disturb her. You know it is so easy to fancy that about a little out-of-the-way spot one has never heard of before. I quite know the feeling myself."

"Oh yes, so do I; anybody might feel it who saw The Hermitage. It looks just at the end of everything!"

"And then Sister does not think she will be here so very long. She came to get rested and strong. But she is getting well fast now. Nurse Lloyd thinks she will go back to her nursing when she has quite recovered. And she does not want to make any root here. She told me so herself. She said it with that little sort of shiver you must have noticed sometimes, as though some painful memory had been stirred. 'I don't want to

Digitized by Google

root myself again,' she said; 'I have been uprooted so often, just when I least expected it. It is such a terrible wrench. It tears your heart-strings. I don't want to go through it again; I have had enough of it.'"

I began to understand better then.

"I see. I think I can understand that feeling. But oh, Roy, I don't want Sister to go away!"

"Nor I. I told her so. I told her we had begun to root ourselves here in her house, and that *we* shouldn't want to be uprooted."

"And what did she say?"

"Oh, she smiled and sighed, and said that we were too young to be seriously hurt by it; and then a sad look came into her eyes, and I did not like to say any more."

We spoke to Sister about Nigel's request, and she answered that I might bring him any day he liked to come. She would be very pleased to give him any help he might want. Sister did not even appear to know that any sort of slight had been put upon her by Lady Lavender. She did not want to be called upon, and to have to return calls, and she thought it kind of people to respect her desire for seclusion.

So a day or two later I took Nigel with me, and we sailed up the creek, and entered as usual by the garden way. Sister was out in the garden tending her roses, and cutting off dead blooms from her plants. She looked very beautiful, I thought, in the fresh September

Digitized by Google

sunlight, and she was singing softly to herself, as she did sometimes. I was always glad to hear her voice, for I thought it must show that she was feeling happier when she sang over her task.

She saw us soon, for Wuppy ran forward barking his welcome. She came to meet us, and received Nigel with a quiet grace and ease of manner which would have surprised me had I not been always prepared to find Sister perfect in every respect. Although she shrank from society and from strangers, nothing could exceed the quiet dignity of her manner when brought face to face with them; nor did that dignity in any way impair her sweetness, which was at least as marked a characteristic.

We all went into Roy's pleasant little room. He was still tied to his bed by reason of the foot, which healed only slowly, although in a quite satisfactory way. Roy was delighted to see a fresh visitor, and had a number of questions to ask Nigel; but soon the talk turned to the cottage hospital, and then it was that Sister's experiences and opinions were required, and I think we were all struck by the clearness and accuracy with which she was able to answer all questions.

Nigel had innumerable points to lay before her, but she was never nonplussed. She had seen so much, and understood the subject so well, that she could answer almost everything with hardly a pause for thought. She made quite a number of really valuable suggestions;

Digitized by Google

she knew, too, just what firms would supply the necessary appliances at the most moderate cost; and she looked through Nigel's lists with an air of thorough mastery of detail which impressed us all.

Some things she crossed off, as being practically valueless in working; others she added which no one had ever thought of. She was wonderfully clear-headed and business-like in her methods. And I could see that Nigel was much impressed.

"I suppose it would be asking too much of you to come and see the place some day, Miss Lucas?" he asked. "But after what you have told me here, I should value your opinion more than I can say; and there are matters connected with the interior arrangement and sanitation which can only be thoroughly understood upon the spot."

Sister paused a single minute, and then replied quietly that if she could be of any use she would come. She also said that her servant Bradley had had charge of a cottage hospital at one time, and might be able to give him some assistance. So Bradley was called, and Nigel and she talked together for a while in another room; then Nigel came back to us, and chatted with Roy about a good many things. But Sister did not appear again, so he presently said good-bye and walked to the ferry, as I wanted the boat to take me home at my own time.

When Nigel had gone, Roy lay some time meditating, and presently he said,—

Digitized by Google

"Nigel is a very good fellow. I sometimes wonder why you are always so nasty to him, Cissy."

I felt myself flush a little, for I was conscious that I was more disagreeable to Nigel than to anybody else in the world, and it was an open question whether he had done anything to merit it. I should have been angry with anybody else who had said such a thing to me, but Roy was always allowed to say what he would; and I must say that, for a brother, his criticisms were uncommonly few and far between.

As it was I only gave my head a little toss, and answered with a short laugh,—

"He is such a prig!"

"No, he's not," said Roy quickly. "He was a bit of a prig a long while ago, as many clever men are, especially if they have a great deal of power in their hands. But he's grown quite out of all that now. He's a very clever, well-informed, and high-principled man, and a very good friend to us. He would stand by us through thick and thin, through good report and evil report, and one might go away for years and come back and find him just the same. It's not many men I would trust as I trust Nigel Lavender, and I rather wonder why you treat him as you do."

"Well, he doesn't care—I don't suppose he even notices."

"On the contrary, I am quite sure that he does notice and does care," answered Roy.

Digitized by Google

"Well, if I could come quite fresh to Nigel; if I had not known him ever since I can remember, and heard his praises sung all these years, perhaps I should feel differently. But I can't do that. I am always thinking of him as he was before he grew sensible. And then I do hate his slow, drawling ways. It's like Lady Lavender in breeches—and in a man it's insufferable! No, Roy, I can't take to Nigel, so it's no use asking me. He may be a perfect compendium of information and a model of virtue, but he bores me to death. I can't get on with him, and it's no use talking about it. It's in me to be nasty to him; I suppose I shall go on to the end of the chapter."

I heard a soft laugh behind me as I finished speaking, and saw that Sister had come quietly in. Suddenly I felt a little ashamed of my outburst of irritation.

"Silly little girl!" she said, meeting my unconsciously appealing glance—for I could not bear the thought of making myself objectionable in her eyes—yet putting her hand upon my head with a caressing gesture.—"But she has time to grow wiser, Roy, so we need not give her up just yet as a bad job. We can all remember some pet aversions of our youth which look so silly and so small when the years have passed over and we have got a little sense into our pates."

"Did you like him, Sister?" I asked, with something almost like jealousy in my voice.

"What little I saw of him I liked," answered Sister

Digitized by Google

quietly; and for a moment I was dead silent, for a sudden thought had come into my mind, and it held me in absolute thrall till I could think it out.

Suppose Nigel were to fall in love with Sister and marry her!

What would not life be like with Sister always at hand—with Sister instead of Lady Lavender ruling at Eagle's Crag?

Was she too old for Nigel? Sister had made no secret of her age. She was thirty-five, and Nigel was not quite thirty; but did that matter? Sister was perfectly lovely—lovelier than any girl I had ever seen. Oh, suppose such a thing could be! But could she possibly care for a man like Nigel? I could imagine any number of men falling in love with her; but she—?

I began to fancy the world did not contain the man good enough for Sister; but yet Roy and Hilda, and even Sister herself, agreed in praising Nigel. I must think about it—I really must; because if such a thing as that could be, and it would make Sister happy, why, I ought to do everything in my power to bring those two together. I would even be nice to Nigel if he could appreciate Sister and (here I fear a malicious thought of Lady Lavender's discomfiture came over me) woo her for his wife.

I don't think I was a very lively companion for Roy that day. I seemed to have so much to think about on my own account.

Digitized by Google

CHAPTER IX.

A STORY ON THE SEA.

I WAS out with Sister in the boat, and the glow of the sunset was around us. She had promised so many times to come out with me, but one thing after another had arisen and put it off. This evening I had been persistent. It was one of those peculiarly glorious evenings which often precede the equinoctial gales, when the sea is like glass, mirroring the glories of the western sky, and the air is warm and still and clear, and the waves break on the rocks in a sort of soft, ceaseless music that is like a song without words.

The sea-birds were coming up the harbour. We had several tokens that the long summer was coming to an end. If Sister wanted to see our dear bay and harbour, she must come now, or the chance might not recur.

So she had come. I had my wish; we were alone together on the shining sea.

Roy was nearly well by this time, and was to go home in a day or two. He might really have been moved before, but we were all so content with things as they were, and the doctor was so well satisfied with the

Digitized by Google

progress of his patient, that he still remained an inmate of Sister's peaceful home. He could get out into the garden without the trouble and fatigue of stairs, and until he could manage these comfortably with his crutch and a stick, it seemed a pity to take him home, where we were altogether dependent on steps inside and out.

Now the crutch was soon to be discarded, and before long Roy would be walking about as before. But he had been so happy at Sister's that the time had not seemed long, and we were both more deeply in love with her than ever.

I had by this time confided to Roy my idea of promoting a match between her and Nigel; but Roy had looked doubtful though interested. He had admitted that it would be "awfully nice," and that to have Sister always close to our home would be first-rate. But he was less sanguine than I about the advisability of trying to arrange other people's affairs; he was rather of opinion that Sister's life held some painful passage which was in all probability some unhappy engagement or love affair.

I rather scouted this notion. I thought it very stupid that people should always think of love affairs directly anybody had had any trouble. Sister was not like that; she was much too nice and sweet, and different from anybody else. She had had some great trouble—that I knew quite well; but I did not believe that love had had anything to do with it.

Digitized by Google

I wondered whether I should ever know the truth about Sister. There had been moments when I was often quite sure that she was very nearly telling me something of her past history. It was not for anything in myself that she was so sweet and kind to me; but I loved her with my whole heart, and I think she knew it. She loved both Roy and me by that time, and sometimes called us "her children." I think it had made her life happier having us so much with her. I know her two faithful servants thought so. It had at least enabled her to talk more freely than she had done at first; and I am sure it is good for people to talk. Some sorrows grow heavier for being always locked up in silence.

We were sailing about on the glassy sea, Sister and I, as I have said. She looked so lovely, with the evening light playing over her and lighting up her golden hair, that I suddenly exclaimed, almost without thinking what I said,—

"Sister, I simply can't imagine how it is you have not married. It seems impossible that men have not fallen in love with you; but then I don't believe any of them is half good enough for you!"

Sister seemed to be thinking deeply. I am not sure that she quite heard all I said, and yet some of my words must have reached her brain, for after a short silence she answered, speaking slowly and dreamily,—

"Ah no! not that, little girl. But there was one of

Digitized by Google

whom I believed everything—to whom I gave everything. When he was gone there seemed nothing left—for me."

I held my breath, and a thrill ran through me. I had touched quite inadvertently the heart of the mystery. Sister had spoken! What could I say?

And yet I must say something. That half-confidence was too precious to be lost. I must make the most of it. I let go the rope, so that the sail fell, and flapped idly against the mast; and I sank down at Sister's feet, possessing myself of one of her hands and holding it, though I did not try to look into her face.

"Did he die?" I asked softly.

I felt a little tremor run through her frame; but the answer was very quietly spoken,—

"No, dear, he did not die; he is living yet."

"Oh!" I breathed, with a strange access of indignation running through me. I could not speak another word, and it was Sister's voice which broke the silence, saying,—

"It happens so often. The man grows tired—he goes away. I think men can forget; but we are not always able."

"He could not have got tired of you!" I cried, with almost a sob in my voice. My heart cried out in a passion of grief and indignation. That Sister should have been wooed and won—and deserted! It seemed monstrous—impossible!

Digitized by Google

"There was perhaps another reason too," said Sister, after a long silence. "When he asked me to marry him —whilst we were engaged—I was rich; I was thought to be an heiress. Then something unexpected happened, and I lost all. I lost him too! It is so often the way."

"Oh," I cried again, in a fury of passion, "then he must have been a wretch—a beast!"

It was not a pretty word, but it came rushing up, and had passed my lips before I had time to think. I am not sure that Sister even heard; though perhaps she did, for she said softly,—

"And yet I would have trusted him—oh, for life and death—for everything!"

She heaved one long, long sigh, and I thought I knew just how her face looked, with the yearning sadness welling up in her soft eyes. I felt another thrill of pity and indignation shaking me through and through. I could have cried aloud in my wrath, but what good would that have done? So I just nestled closer up to Sister, and said softly,—

"Will you tell me about it? or does it hurt you too much?"

Her hand was on my head; I felt her fingers stroking my hair. I did not know whether she would respond to my request or not, but I waited quite quietly, and at last I heard her voice speaking dreamily and softly, as though her mind had gone back a long, long way, and was busy over vanished days and scenes.

Digitized by Google

"I was an only child, you know, Cissy. Have I not told you that I never had any brother or sister?"

"Yes; and that you cannot remember your mother. You have told me that, Sister."

"Yes; my mother died when I was only a few days old. It almost broke my father's heart. But she had given me to him as a last charge; and so, when he could begin to notice things again, he found that he had something to love, although it was only a tiny little baby."

Sister paused for a while, and then went on speaking,—

"My first memories are all of my father. He was the whole world to me. We lived in a beautiful old house—never mind exactly where, but a long way from here. I had everything I wanted; and from being quite a little child I was his companion, and went everywhere with him. I'm afraid it even interfered rather with my education; for although he taught me a great deal without books, I never received quite the training which most girls of my position do. I often feel—used to feel—very ignorant when hearing them talk of their studies and their accomplishments."

"You never were ignorant; you know all about everything that is useful," I cried eagerly. "That is what I call being educated. I should like to learn like that. I hate cram!"

"Well, whether it was for good or not, I was brought

Digitized by Google

up in that sort of way. I had governesses who came to teach me; but they used to complain that I kept irregular hours. That was the charm of life to me. I never knew from day to day what would come next. Father had travelled much before his marriage, and after mother's death he would sometimes have restless fits, and want to get away from home. He did not travel abroad much, but he used to take me with him on little or long driving tours. He had a number of horses, and he was a splendid rider and driver. He used to take a house in Leicestershire for the hunting season, and after I was twelve I always went with him, and rode to hounds beside him. As I grew older he got me the cleverest hunters money could buy; and he was so proud of me, and used to call me his 'little Diana.'" Sister suddenly paused and drew a long breath.

"Ah me! ah me!" she whispered softly; "the days that are no more!"

I laid my cheek against her hand, but did not try to speak. I felt mute in the presence of a sorrow of which I knew nothing. I had lost my father, it is true; but he was only a childish memory to me. I had had such a bright, untroubled life. It sometimes set me wondering why it was that some people seemed to have all the sunshine, whilst others walked always in the shadow. And yet Sister had plainly had a very happy life for a certain number of years.

"I was never separated from my father till I was

Digitized by Google

turned twenty; and then something came which obliged him to leave me. He had property in the West Indies, and he heard disquieting rumours about it. He wrote letter after letter, but the replies were vague and unsatisfactory. He decided that he must go himself and look into things.

"At first it was taken as a matter of course that I should go too. We never thought of such a thing as being separated. But when details came to be looked into, it grew more and more difficult, and finally he had to decide to leave me behind."

"Were you very sorry?" I asked, looking up for the first time into Sister's face, for the story was not at this point fraught with any specially painful memories.

"Yes, I was very disappointed; but I saw the reason for the decision, and I tried to keep my disappointment to myself. For if I had made a fuss, it would have been so much harder for father. The only thing I felt I could not stand was to live alone at home all those months—for we knew it would be a question of months, perhaps nearly a year."

"But you had lots of friends to go to?"

"No, I had not—not friends with whom I could stay on in an indefinite sort of way."

Sister paused, stroking my hair gently, and then said, with a smile in her voice,—

"I am afraid, looking back, that father and I were rather selfish or self-absorbed in our love. My father

Digitized by Google

had always been a rather shy man, and during the early days of his widowerhood he had quite shut himself away from society. Afterwards, whilst engrossed with me and my upbringing, he had been equally absorbed, and so it came about that whilst we gave parties and went to them, and saw our neighbours in that sort of way, we never seemed to draw very near to them, or to get really intimate."

"Well, I think that is rather nice," I said quickly, resolved to admire everything that Sister ever did. "It is sometimes a great bore having neighbours always dropping in, and never knowing when you are safe."

"Nevertheless," answered Sister quietly, "I think we made a mistake. If I had my life to live over again, I would do differently. When we are young, and have some prop to lean upon (though we do not know how much we do lean), we feel strong enough to defy the world and fate. We feel sufficient for ourselves. But as we grow older things look different. And yet it is so hard to break through the wall we have built around ourselves. I have felt that so often — so often."

She lapsed into silence, and I said nothing. I thought Sister was quite perfect as she was, and that her little air of isolation was one of her great charms. Perhaps it might be happier to be a person of many friends, but it was not so interesting.

"And did your father go away?" I asked at last,

Digitized by Google

fearing that I should lose my story if Sister were allowed to go on dreaming indefinitely.

"Yes; but before he went he had, at my earnest request, made arrangements for me to be taken as a probationer at a London hospital, and receive a year's training there."

"O Sister, what made you think of that?"

"I scarcely know. I felt as I say, that life at home alone would be unbearable; and I had no desire to go visiting at houses where I felt I should never feel at home. I always felt that I had been differently brought up from other girls, and I used to think they did not like me. It might have been fancy; but father and I were always terribly thin-skinned. Perhaps we fancied things that were not true. But I often thought I was not welcome; and it was a dreadful feeling!"

"I expect the girls were jealous because you were so lovely," I said hotly; and Sister laid her hand upon my lips.

"Silly little girl!" she said softly; "what do you know about it? You never saw me till after I had grown old and ugly."

I raised myself up in great indignation, prepared to burst out into vehement speech; but Sister clasped her strong hands firmly over my mouth, and went on speaking,—

"I had always felt a love for taking care of sick people. If a servant, or one of the cottagers, or any of

Digitized by Google

the outdoor people's children were ill, I always wanted to go and see them, and do little things for them; and if ever father ailed anything, it was my great pleasure to take exclusive care of him. But I was always feeling my inexperience and lack of training. Our old doctor sometimes said I was a 'good nurse wasted.' When I knew that I was to be left alone, I went and talked to him, and he told me he really thought I had the gift, but that it would not be much use my training for a nurse, as I should certainly never find that my vocation."

"Yet you did," I interjected softly; but I do not think that Sister heard me.

"However, that did not seem to me reason enough for giving up my plan. Suppose father were ever to be seriously ill? It was a thing which might happen. He was no longer young, and the time might come— Well, without finishing that thought, it still appeared to me that a knowledge of nursing would never be thrown away. I had seldom thought, so far, of marrying. It had seemed impossible to picture such a thing as leaving father for anybody else. But even suppose I were to marry, it might be a very good thing to know about sickness. The more I thought about it, the more I wanted to do it; and when I spoke to father, he soon became quite interested in the plan."

"But wasn't it very hard work?"

"Yes; he was a little afraid about that. But I was

Digitized by Google

very strong. I was not afraid, and I told him that hard work was just what I wanted to keep me from fretting after him. He saw that, of course; and we went up to London together, and made a lot of inquiries, and visited a lot of places; and finally I made my choice, and brought my little belongings and outfit, and found myself lodged in a tiny little cubicle, right up in a very big building amongst a number of other girls, some of them ladies, and some of them rather nondescript, who were also probationers in the same hospital."

"Oh, wasn't it very strange?"

"Yes; but I took to the life and the work, and I did not mind the little bits of drudgery. Father was a whole month in London after he had seen me safe into my new home; and he came often, and took me out when I had my time off. It broke the strangeness having him coming in and out; and the superintendent was very good to me, although she was too just to show favouritism. Father went away happy about me, and I was soon very happy in my work, so that the days and weeks ran quickly by, and I found myself quite surprised at the flight of time."

"And how long did it last?"

"I stayed my year, as had been arranged. Father was back just a little before it ended; but he was busy in London, and I wanted to remain on till I had really been my time. I realized then how little I still knew about nursing—how much, much more there was to

Digitized by Google

learn; but still I had done well, so they said, and I had learned a great deal as compared with my former small smattering. I had read books and attended some lectures. I used to feel that if ever things were different with me—if ever I should be left alone in the world—I would be a nurse. It seemed to me a beautiful sort of life, because it took you so much out of yourself, and put you in touch with others. I began to feel that there had been a want in my life before. In one sense of the word I had been happier in hospital than even at home, although the absence of my father had made a daily blank."

"But you went home when he came back?"

"Oh yes, I went home when he came back," repeated Sister, in a dreamy voice; then she was silent a long, long time, and I asked no question, for I felt that she was making up her mind to say something difficult. After a long pause it came.

"I must tell you of one thing that happened when I was at the hospital. It was whilst I was in the accident ward. There had been a bad street accident near to the hospital. A carriage with ladies in it had been run away with, and a young officer had stopped the horses at considerable risk to his own life. He was rather badly hurt, and was brought to the hospital. He had to stay there for a week before he could be moved."

I felt that we were now approaching the real secret of Sister's life. I held her hand close, and laid my head

Digitized by Google

upon her knee. I listened with all my ears, almost holding my breath.

"I did not have much to do with him. As probationer, I just got things ready for the surgeons before they came—brought him food and medicine, and so on. Of course, the fact that he was a gentleman, an officer, and had been a bit of a hero, made him more interesting than the ordinary cases; but I was busy all over the ward, and I had not a great deal of thought to give him. Nor did he talk very much to anybody in particular, though in the afternoons, when things were quiet, he would tell soldier stories to the men, to their great delight. He was a very bright-spirited, merry fellow, and was quite a favourite with the doctors and students, who came to chat with him often. But at the end of a week he was well enough to be taken away, and after having thanked us all very pleasantly for what we had done for him, he was carried away in an ambulance, and I never expected to see him again."

"But you did?"

"Yes; not very long after we had gone home again. About four miles from us was a town where soldiers were quartered, and there were plenty of gay doings amongst the military people there. I had never been to these functions before, save quite occasionally; but when we got home again, father himself proposed that we should not resume our hermit life quite as of old, but should go out more and mix with our kind."

Digitized by Google

My thoughts flew off during the next pause to something that Roy had said to me quite soon after he had been in Sister's house. He told me not to talk about Garth and his regiment at Watchet Bay; he had a sort of feeling that Sister shrank from any mention of military gaieties and that sort of thing. Roy had very quick perceptions, and I was willing to be guided by his advice. Now I began to understand. I felt sure that the trouble in Sister's life was connected in one way or another with an officer. Of course she would not like to hear talk about such things. I now resolved never to mention them to her.

"I was quite willing to please father in this. That separation had, I think, been good for us both. We were both more sociably inclined. Father was often rather grave, and he told me he was afraid his money matters were not quite as prosperous as they should be. He had some anxieties of that sort; but for the rest he was more cheerful than of old, and I had learned in part to come out of my shell—was willing to go out into the world a little more, and see what was going on there.

"We now accepted invitations which once we had refused; and so it came about that I met Captain—no, I will not mention his name. I will call him by the name I used to give him sometimes. They got up tableaux once, and they wanted me for Elaine, because of my long yellow hair. It was rather pretty hair then, before it had got all grey and faded—"

Digitized by Google

"Sister!" I cried indignantly; "it's the loveliest hair in the world now. You should see the sun shine on it. Faded indeed! Grey? there is not a grey hair in it!"

"Is there not indeed, little girl? Ah, I know better! Never mind; it had no grey hairs then, and so they chose me for Elaine, and he was Sir Lancelot in shining armour. After that he sometimes called me Elaine, and I called him Lancelot."

She paused, and I murmured softly, "Lancelot was faithless!" but I do not think she heard.

"Well, time went on. Father took a fancy to Lancelot, and he came backwards and forwards to our house, and everything seemed to change in life. I did not know what it was till he asked me to be his wife; and then I understood.

"I said I did not know how to leave father, although I knew I loved that other best. But Lancelot and father had talked it all out together, and father was as pleased as heart could wish. He told me that to see me happily married before he died had been the great wish of his heart.

"Everything seemed to smile upon us. Lancelot was not rich; indeed he had little but his pay—just enough private income to make his life in the army comfortable. But he had prospects—not immediate, but he would probably come into a fair fortune before he was fifty. Father looked into it all, and then he made this suggestion. Lancelot should marry me soon, and for a few

Digitized by Google

years I should divide my time between barracks and home, and all the long leave should be spent at home with him. Whilst I was away with my husband, father would do a little more travelling, the taste for which seemed to have revived in him again. Then, after a few years, Lancelot should give up the army altogether, and settle down upon the estate which would one day be mine. By that time father would be growing old, and would like to see a son taking over the reins of government into his capable hands. He need not make a trouble of living upon his wife's money for a few years; before very long, in the course of nature, he would come into a comfortable competence himself; and it would be a sin to waste the best years of our lives waiting for dead men's shoes, when a home and a welcome and everything needful was waiting for us there."

Sister paused. She had been speaking very slowly, as if the story cost her some effort. I was keenly anxious to know the end, yet I could not bear her to hurt herself.

"Don't tell me the rest—unless you don't mind," I whispered; "I can guess, if it hurts you to speak."

"I will tell you about it, little girl," answered Sister; "I have said too much to stop now. You shall know all; but you will keep my secret?"

"O Sister, yes; I will never speak a word to any one."

"It is such an old story now it ought not to hurt, and yet it does; but it will soon be over now. Every-

Digitized by Google

thing was arranged. We were to be married almost at once. I had even bought the wedding-dress—it was coming so very, very near. And then two things happened to postpone it. Within a week of the wedding-day father fell ill. We did not think it dangerous, but there could be no talk of the wedding till he was better; and whilst he still lay in a critical state, a small war broke out in Africa, and Lancelot's regiment was ordered instantly to the front."

"But did he go? He should have stayed with you."

"No, little girl. Lancelot's first duty at such a moment was to his country. It was not a time either to shrink back or exchange. He came and spoke to me about it, and we agreed that he must go. He declared that when he came back (he would not say *if* he came back, yet we all knew there was danger to be faced) he would give up the army, and come and be a son to father, whose state of health was now, as we knew, much impaired. Then we said good-bye, and he went. I have never seen him since."

"O Sister!"

"I can finish in a few words now. Whilst he was still preparing to go and getting off, my father died. I wrote and told him; but no answer came back. He might not have got the letter. Then came an examination into affairs, and it was found that father's trusted solicitor, who had done all his English business for him, and had paid the interest of his money punctually, had

Digitized by Google

been for years making away with securities, getting father to sign papers purporting to be a simple change of investment; and father had evidently been his dupe, and all was gone. There was nothing left for me but a hundred a year. House and lands and income—all had been swept away."

"O Sister!"

"Yes, it came on me like a thunderbolt; and I realized what it meant to us, for how could we marry on such tiny means? I knew that I must not be a drag and an incubus to Lancelot, and I wrote to him offering him his liberty. Yet I did not think he would take it. I thought he would have waited; and we knew that by-and-by— But men see things differently. They are not patient, and no doubt it was hard upon him. He wrote back." Sister paused and gave a little shiver. I felt her hand move restlessly upon my head. "After that, I knew all was over. I had been deceived. A man who wrote that letter—well, I could not love him as I had done. But oh, it hurt—it hurt!"

My heart swelled with indignation and pity. I felt the hot tears rising in my eyes. With a little sob I rose on my knees and flung my arms about Sister.

"Oh, what a wicked man—what a cruel, wicked man! O Sister, how could he?—and to you!"

She bent over me and kissed me, once, twice, thrice, with a clinging pressure of the lips, as though she felt the need of sympathy.

Digitized by Google

"Ah, it is all a long time ago now! But I was torn up by the roots, and one remembers the feel of it all one's life. That was the first time—and the worst."

I looked at her earnestly. Was there more trouble yet to learn? She smiled back at me in a way that was infinitely pathetic.

"I went back to the hospital, and I finished my training. I was then made ward sister, and there I stayed on many years; happy years they began to be, as I tried to forget, and the new life became more real than the old. I began to take root again. I was busy and I was content, if I could not be happy. But it seemed as though it were not to be. Things happened—" Sister made a little expressive gesture with her hands, and her face expressed a number of conflicting emotions. "It was all nonsense. But I had to go. I could not stand it. I had to uproot myself again. It was not so bad as the first, but still it hurt. I felt I never wanted to settle anywhere again."

"And you came here?"

"No, not at once. I could not have done so; I was not well enough off. I applied for the post of superintendent to a hospital not in London. I got it, and I stayed some time. But the long strain of hard work began to tell. I was threatened with many things by many doctors. Then a relation I had hardly even heard of died. There was no will; but I was next of kin. I found myself a fairly well-to-do woman; but I was

Digitized by Google

almost on the verge of breaking down. It was another uprooting, but I did not mind it this time. I had not struck any roots; I said I never would. I heard quite by chance of this place. The climate was one recommended to me. I came and found The Hermitage. I took it for three years. What I shall do then I don't know; I only know that I want to make no more roots. Sometimes I am half afraid of you children; I am learning to love you so much. Now, take me home, little girl. The sun is down, and the wind feels chilly on the water."

Digitized by Google

CHAPTER X.

AUTUMN DAYS.

NEXT day Roy was taken home, and just in time, too.

On the following morning we awoke to the howling of the south-west wind, which rose to a gale during the course of the day. The ferry-boat between the two banks of the harbour was unable to cross for two whole days, and then it took four men to get it backwards and forwards, and almost an hour of time in the transit.

For nearly three weeks we were practically cut off from our neighbours across the water, and those long days spent with Sister beneath the trees of her garden in the hot summer sunshine seemed almost like a dream.

Sister had become so much an element in our lives, and the centre of our thoughts, that this sudden cessation of intercourse seemed very strange, and I confess to me it was very unwelcome. I had a hundred things I wanted to say to her every day, and I looked dis-

Digitized by Google

mally at the great waves rolling up the river's mouth, and even meditated riding or walking up to Queensbridge, and so skirting along the road and getting to The Hermitage that way; but the journey there and back over the bad roads was too much at this time of year. Roy could not, of course, accompany me, and I knew it would sound absurd to suggest going alone.

As for Wuppy, he was simply inconsolable, and whined and whimpered about the house all day in a fashion that was not flattering to our feelings. He would not play with Chips, and he hectored it so over Monk that that gentle-spirited collie could not call his life his own, and was usually driven into some obscure corner, and told to remain there till his tyrant relented and let him come out.

I had not before given Wuppy credit either for very deep affection or for any great amount of intelligence, but he certainly developed both in his affection for Sister and his determination to get back to her.

I noticed that he often disappeared, where I did not know, but for the first days he returned at short intervals. At last there came a day when he vanished, and came no more; but before we had begun to be uneasy at his absence, there came a message from the old ferry-man to say that "Missy's little brown dog had got into the boat unknown to them, and had jumped ashore at the other side, and gone tearing up the road; and though they had waited and whistled and

Digitized by Google

gone to look for him, they could not find him, and had had to come back without the creature."

How we laughed when we heard that!

"He has gone back to Sister!" I cried. "Oh, clever little Wuppy! who would have thought it of him? You know, Roy, I can hardly ever persuade Wuppy to cross in the ferry-boat. He thinks it *infra dig*—like going in an omnibus to people who are used to their own carriages. Just think of his sneaking in all alone and getting ferried across! How Sister will laugh when she knows! I must send a note across the next time the boat goes, telling her she had better keep him. For if he has made up his mind to belong to her, he will never stay here. He is the most determined little wretch you ever knew."

So finding that the boat was going across once more that day, I sent my little note; I would even have gone myself, but that mother objected. And it was really rather an undertaking. I had been before in the ferry-boat when the waves washed in and wet one to the skin. I should not have minded a wetting for the pleasure of seeing Sister again, but I did not want to make myself or her ridiculous in the eyes of other people; so I said nothing, and waited for better weather.

It was something to get back one of Sister's sweet little notes. She had written it for the post, to tell how Wuppy had arrived, a little dripping, shivering dog, whining to be let in at the window. Sister had

Digitized by Google

almost wondered whether he could possibly have swum across, but thought such a feat beyond his power. She had added a postscript after the arrival of our note, saying she would keep the truant till we could settle something about him. We thought she was pleased by his preference, and knew that he would now be quite happy

We sat and talked of Sister unweariedly by our cosy fire, to the accompaniment of moaning wind and lashing rain.

Sister had said I might tell her story to Roy—the story I had heard out in the boat; and indeed Roy had picked up here and there a little bit of it already, so that he readily understood. He was as indignant as I could possibly desire with the "cur" who had treated Sister so. Moreover, he was able to tell me a few details omitted by Sister in her narrative, which he had picked up from her faithful servants and friends.

He knew why she had had to leave the hospital, where she had been so happy so many years.

"It was because one of the doctors fell in love with her. He wouldn't take 'No' for an answer, and he had an appointment there for several years—there was no getting rid of him. Poor fellow! one can be sorry for him, but he should not have been so persistent. At last Sister could stand it no longer. People were beginning to talk about it. She is dreadfully sensitive, as one can see. She could not bear it, and she went.

Digitized by Google

But she had grown fond of the life and the people and the nurses, and it seemed another uprooting when she had found a home again. I think it was awfully hard upon her. It was the man who should have gone. But it seems to me it is always the woman who suffers in these things. Poor Sister!"

"O Roy, how I wish we could do something to make her happy! Oh, if only things could come right, or if she could care for somebody else! Do you think she ever would? Or does she still think about—about—that wretched—Lancelot?"

"I don't know. In one way I don't think she can care for him now, and yet it may be that she will never care for anybody else. Some people cannot forget. One loves them for it, but it makes life very hard."

"She saw Nigel again, when she went to look at the hospital; do you think she liked him at all?"

"Yes, she spoke as though she liked him quite, but that is altogether a different thing from what you mean. I think, Cissy, you will have to give up trying to make matches for Sister. It is dangerous trying to meddle in other people's love affairs."

"I don't want to meddle," I answered eagerly, "only to watch if they seem at all inclined to like each other. Oh, I do so want to see Sister happy again!"

Roy was with me there, but he had not my feminine impetuosity. I almost made friends with Nigel over Sister's many perfections, which I dwelt upon to him

Digitized by Google

at great length. But I observed that he never seemed to weary of the subject, and I thought that a good sign. He took me down to the cottage hospital one day, to show me all Sister's suggestions carried out. I was delighted with the place, and with its home-like appearance. It was to be inhabited almost at once by the first set of guests. These were not to be exactly patients, but some overworked women from a large town, who were to come down for a few weeks' rest and change.

Sister had recommended a suitable woman to take present charge. There was still some talk of a lady superintendent when the thing got fairly started, but for the present a capable woman, with a good servant under her, could do all that was needful, and I had a suspicion that perhaps Nigel had hopes of getting either Sister herself or one of her servants for the post later on.

Hilda was looking quite a different person, as I began to notice when I had thoughts to spare for other people. She had lost that rather discontented, lowering look which had once spoiled her face a good deal. She was softer in her manner, and yet it was not lacking in decision. She talked well, much better than I had ever heard her before, and was eager to take the outside management of the place pending more permanent arrangements.

This Nigel had been quite ready to accord her. He

Digitized by Google

was glad to think that somebody would overlook the working of the home from day to day. The thing was just starting, and he hoped that it would thrive and grow; but he knew that all experiments require care and watching, yet it was hardly man's work to be always popping in and out.

Hilda was ready to do this, to order stores, oversee the accounts, and take counsel from day to day with the woman in charge. I was almost amused at her eagerness and enthusiasm over her new duties. I liked her for it, and almost envied her in having found work so quickly and easily.

"When the poor people come, you can help too, I am sure, Cissy," she said earnestly. "We want to try to make life less bitter for them. Nigel and Mr. Hawke both say that with care and pains and patience a good deal can be done in that way. Often one sees in the papers notices of persons wanted for one thing or another. If we try hard to keep our eyes and ears open, we might all of us do something towards getting the right people into the right places. Of course the over-population is a terrible thing, and there are problems none of us will ever solve; but if everybody tried never to lose the chance! That is how we feel about it, and you will help too. Everybody can do a little."

Aunt Joan said much the same thing, though in her more terse and decided way.

Digitized by Google

"The only way to do good work is to help people to help themselves. Charity may tide over a gap, but it is useful only for bridging gaps. No able-bodied person ought ever to live upon charity, whatever his place in life may be and whatever he may call it. Get the people into places where there is work for them to do —that is what we must try for. And just now for women and girls there is an immense field in the direction of domestic service. Girls don't take to service in these days—more fools they, as I often tell them—they think they have more independence working at other things. Independence forsooth! And then we have articles coming out about the 'White Slaves of England,' telling us the result of this fine independence — starvation, sickness, misery of every kind, the weary waiting for work that may or may not come, brutal treatment from overseers, every danger and horror that can beset a girl's path, and often a shilling a day wage at the end of it! Independence! my heart burns at the word sometimes. Think what those girls have to put up with! And yet a little pert servant will leave a good mistress, with whom she has a kind home and easy work, because she has been chidden for some small fault, and doesn't choose to stop! We live in a strange world and in strange times, my dear. But the fashionable independence of the modern girl, be she gentle or simple, is a very different thing from the independence of the good old days!"

Digitized by Google

And by-and-by I found that Aunt Joan was one of those who did a really most self-sacrificing thing in order to help others to help themselves. She would admit to her house untrained girls of good character, and have them trained under her own capable servants for one or two years, and then send them out into good situations (which were never lacking), with their business thoroughly learned—a good trade, as you might say, at their finger ends; able to face the world and earn enough to keep themselves, to help at home if need were, or to lay by against a rainy day.

"And I tell you, Cissy, I have always more applications for these girls than I can answer. I could keep a regular office for them if I could train them fast enough. Just now the demand for trained servants is far in excess of the supply. If you want to help a poor girl in these days, help her to a good situation; but to do so, of course she must first be trained. I have several friends in my neighbourhood who are doing the same thing. I think amongst us we send out about a dozen girls in the year to good homes, who else might drift down into unspeakable misery and vice, or swell the overcrowded ranks of workers who are living on starvation wage, and submitting to awful privations in the battle of life."

"O Aunt Joan!" I cried, fired by a zeal to emulate her. "Do you think I could do anything like that?"

"I think you might talk the matter over with your

Digitized by Google

mother, as I will do too. Then if you were to hear, from some of those poor creatures who are coming down to Nigel's home, of a daughter at home with nothing before her but the prospect of being a mere drudge in some tradesman's house, or going into some of those underpaid trades where things are so pitifully hard for all, you might then decide whether, with your mother's sanction, you could offer her a situation as under-house-maid or scullery-maid here, where she would get a thorough training, and rise to a well-paid situation in time. If you would take an interest in her yourself, I am sure the good servants here would do the same, and you might be a blessing to her for life. In small houses these experiments are difficult, often impossible; but in large ones, where there is plenty of room, and one servant more or less makes little difference, the thing can often be successfully done. You say it is so hard to find anything to do; that is perhaps true—girls placed as you are placed often feel the same. But here is one small thing you might do—always with your mother's sanction and approval. At any rate you can think it over and talk about it with her."

"I will," I answered eagerly, and felt that though it was a very small and perhaps not a very interesting kind of work, yet it might be something, and I was in earnest not to let my life be just nothing but pleasure and ease. Indeed if Aunt Joan had suggested something harder and more disagreeable, I should have been

Digitized by Google

better pleased, but I always felt that what Aunt Joan said carried weight. She was so practical and clever, and never indulged in idle speculations and untenable theories.

However, life was not altogether given over to these things at this time; we had other excitements in the air.

Garth's regiment had come into quarters at Watchet Bay, and we were going to give a dinner-party to which Garth was to bring his friend Colonel Clarence. It was to be a friendly sort of dinner; only the Lavenders and their guest, and the clergyman, who was a great friend, were invited. Mr. Clarence had just come on his promised visit to Eagle's Crag. I was quite sure that this meeting with his cousin would be the first since they had parted, quite a number of years before. For one reason or another I was rather interested about it.

We had not seen much of Mr. Clarence, although he had been in the neighbourhood for many weeks, and was quite lover-like in riding over often to see Amy. It appeared that the course of true love was running very smoothly between them. Amy always looked beatifically happy, and already there was talk of a wedding at Easter. There was nothing to wait for, apparently. Mr. Clarence was well off, and Amy had a snug little fortune settled upon her under her father's will; so Roy told me. If they were sure of

Digitized by Google

each other, they could just as well be married quickly as not.

Our dinner-party was to include Mr. Hawke, who had stayed at Eagle's Crag all the time Roy was at The Hermitage, and had come back to us only for the last ten days of the vacation. He had been coaching young Tom as part of his occupation, and for the rest Nigel had persuaded him to remain on and abandon the idea of returning to Oxford till the term opened.

We wanted Garth to meet him, and Garth's visits had been at first of so brief and flying a description that there was no satisfaction to be got out of them.

However, to-night he was coming with his friend, and they would both remain till the morrow. We should make the acquaintance of his chief friend and superior officer, and he would renew acquaintance with the Lavenders, and see Mr. Hawke, of whom we had all grown very fond.

It was easy to give a dinner-party with Aunt Joan in the house to act as hostess. I could not bear the responsibilities of that position at anything so formal, and mother never had dinner company on that account. She herself could never act the part of hostess at table. She was only to be seen in the drawing-room afterwards, lying upon her couch, looking very lovely and fragile, and ready for a talk with all her friends, but quite unequal to the exertion of sitting through at table.

I was rather excited as I dressed for dinner that

Digitized by Google

evening. I had a new dress for the occasion—a white silk, with big, puffed sleeves, and some very exquisite old lace draped about it, which mother had had in her stores for a long time. My arms and neck were bare, and I had a little row of old pearls round my throat. They were quaintly set in very fine old silver, and had been in the family a very long time. Bracelets and rings I could not bear, so I wore nothing in the way of ornament save the little necklet, and some sprays of white roses and drooping ferns.

I was rather impressed by my elegant and grown-up appearance as I surveyed myself in a long mirror. My dress lay behind me in a miniature train, and it made me look quite an inch or two taller than I generally appeared. Garth had brought me a beautiful fan, which he had had lying by for me for some time and forgotten to send. I sailed down into the drawing-room with a good deal of pride, and swept Roy a very magnificent courtesy as I made my entrance.

"Bravo, Cissy! Why, you've blossomed out into quite a howler!" he remarked. "The colonel will think you quite good-looking, not having seen you before!"

"Well, suppose he does, what a disappointment for him when he sees me to-morrow! Have they come yet, Roy?"

"Yes, whilst you were all up dressing. I did the civil, and sent them off to their rooms. The colonel is

Digitized by Google

a fine-looking fellow—just a trifle like the other chap, but taller, statelier, with an altogether finer look about him. I took to him directly I saw him; and I can never quite take to the civilian, though really I don't know why. It's a case of Dr. Fell both with me and Nigel. There doesn't seem a thing to be said against him, though, in any way."

Aunt Joan came down at that moment, handsome, upright, well and quietly dressed as was her fashion; she looked me over with an approving nod, patted my cheek, and smiled. Then we heard the arrival of the Lavenders, who soon sailed in, the whole family—even Tom, who generally abhorred all social functions—and with them their guest, Mr. Clarence, who looked even more irreproachable than usual in his evening dress.

Mr. Hawke appeared, and stood a little aside with Nigel in one corner, after the fashion of men folk. Roy and Tom had gravitated together. Lady Lavender and Aunt Joan sat upon the sofa and exchanged civilities; whilst we girls stood round the fire and chatted together, taking notes of our respective dresses and ornaments, and laughing at our small jokes.

Mr. Clarence, for the moment left out of the groups, took up a photograph frame on the table and turned it over, and then, having exhausted its contents, laid hands on something else. That something else happened to be my sketch-book, which I had inadvertently left about. I felt rather annoyed, as I hated having my

Digitized by Google

"I saw him give a great start."

Page 211.

Digitized by Google

Digitized by Google

rough drawings looked at. I wished I could think of some excuse for going up and getting the book away; but I could not think of one, and meantime stood watching him with a sense of annoyance and irritation, until something happened which aroused another feeling as well.

He had turned several leaves idly over, when suddenly as he turned a new one I saw him give a great start. The book trembled in his grasp, and his cheek—I was quite certain of it, it was no effect of light—turned deadly pale.

He stood staring at the open page like a man distracted, and I stood looking at him in a species of fascination. What *had* he got, and what did it mean?

I must go and see. I could not endure to be left in ignorance. I moved slightly away from my station by the fire. Hilda and Amy had just turned their heads to answer some question of their mother's, and I had heard steps outside the door which betokened the approach of Garth and his friend.

I moved forward as if to be ready to welcome them, but as I passed I peeped over at the book in Mr. Clarence's hands, and then I too gave something of a start. For upon the page at which he was staring like a man in a trance was a sketch of Sister—just a head roughly dashed in, and yet not devoid of likeness to the original. I never could finish a portrait; but my rough sketches were not bad, and I had succeeded

Digitized by Google

in catching something of the sweet sadness of Sister's face. Roy had liked it, and told me not to touch it, as I should only spoil it if I did. So there it was, just as I had taken it once when she was sitting beside Roy and talking to him.

I did not pause as I passed Mr. Clarence, and yet with what Roy would call "the tail of my eye" I saw him start, and suddenly close and thrust the book away beneath a heap of others lying on the far side of the table, where nobody would be likely to touch it. Then I saw nothing more, for Garth had come in, and behind him a tall, handsome, military-looking man, whom he introduced as Colonel Clarence.

There were a good many greetings to be made, and the colonel went through his part with a manly ease and courtesy which impressed me favourably. But I could not help watching with some intentness the meeting between him and his cousin.

A strange change had come over Mr. Clarence. He was almost ghastly pale, and I could see that he was holding himself under very strong pressure of some sort. His lips looked dry, and I observed a nervous twitch at the corners. He was just waiting for the moment to come when he could address his cousin, and I thought he looked like a man waiting to be shot.

I was perplexed, excited, brimming over with curiosity. Was it possible that it was the sight of my sketch that had so upset this self-contained man of the

Digitized by Google

world? or was that merely a chance coincidence, and were his real absorption and tremor due to the consciousness that he and Colonel Clarence were about to meet face to face? Hilda had always declared that there was something constrained in Mr. Clarence's look or manner when the colonel was named. Perhaps he had not really seen my sketch at all, but had been listening to the sounds which denoted the approach of the two officers.

Now the two kinsmen were shaking hands. On Colonel Clarence's face there was a look of frank pleasure and good-will; but meeting the look in the other's eyes, he exclaimed quickly,—

"Why, Edward, you are looking very much out of sorts. Have you been ill, man?"

Simultaneously with the utterance of these words dinner was announced, and I do not think the rest of the company heard them. I did, however, and the low-toned answer returned by Mr. Clarence,—

"It's nothing—just one of my old giddy turns. Don't say anything here; a glass of wine will set me right."

Then we all began filing in to dinner, and nothing more could be said on the subject.

Garth led the way with Lady Lavender, and the clergyman took Hilda. Amy was allotted to her lover, and looked beaming. I was to go in with the colonel, and was quite pleased with that arrangement. The

Digitized by Google

boys and Mr. Hawke had no ladies, and were quite agreeable to that arrangement. Aunt Joan with Nigel brought up the rear. It was quite an informal little party, and at first the conversation was general. Garth and my colonel were asked a good many questions about their quarters at Watchet Bay, and Tom hoped they would wake up the place a bit now that they had come.

"We've had a good dull time down here these last months," he said. "It's quite time we were woke up. We've sunk to this level that the opening of a cottage hospital is a wild excitement! Flannels and soup and bed-quilts are the common topic of conversation. It's awfully exciting, I can tell you!"

There was a general laugh at that, and we all disclaimed; but Tom was incorrigible, and would not be put down. However, the laugh seemed to set us all more at our ease, and the colonel turned to me with a smile in his pleasant eyes.

"Hospitals are valuable institutions—far be it from a soldier to decry them; but variety is the salt of life. I hope you are not too much engulfed in good deeds to enjoy a little wholesome amusement too. We like to enjoy ourselves between whiles, and we look for the ladies to help us."

"Oh, I shall like that. I have seen so few things, and I am not at all given to good deeds. I often think I don't do anything. Other people do all the work, but

Digitized by Google

I seem to have nothing to do but look on. It's rather dull, I think. I should like to do some good too."

"I don't think you will find much trouble about that when the time comes; but we all have to serve our time and learn our duties before we go to the front. Raw recruits are not of much use there, and I suppose the same principle holds good with life in other fields."

"Yes, I suppose so," I answered, with a little sigh; "and I am a very raw recruit, I'm afraid."

I was thinking of Sister, and of her gentle, capable ways. How different she seemed from the rest of the world! And she had been through a training that had been very hard in more senses than one. She had been through the furnace of sorrow, and that in itself meant so much, so very much.

My companion's eyes were upon me; I looked up and met his glance. Something in it reminded me, I cannot tell why, of the look I had so often seen in Sister's. There was not the least likeness except in the expression; but there it was, and it gave me a little start.

But before the colonel could speak, if he had had any intention of doing so, somebody addressed him with a question, and again the talk became general for some time.

I looked across at Mr. Clarence. I could see him very well. He did not talk much, except to Amy; and she blushed and smiled, and seemed delighted to have his attention concentrated upon herself. His face did

Digitized by Google

not look quite natural even now, although the grey ghastly look had gone. I thought that his eyes often wandered even whilst Amy was talking softly to him. He gave me the impression of being preoccupied and ill at ease; yet he was so self-controlled that nobody, I think, would have observed this who had not some reason for expecting to see it.

He and the colonel sometimes spoke to each other, asking a question, or recalling a reminiscence of old days; but I suppose they waited till we had gone for anything like a confidential chat. Anyhow the gentlemen were rather a long time in joining us, and when they did I was rather surprised at finding myself singled out by Mr. Clarence for special notice.

Hitherto he had, I fancy, regarded me rather in the light of a little girl; but to-day his manner was different. I was standing near to the table where he had thrust my sketch-book out of sight, and I saw his eyes fall upon it immediately, as if to see whether it had been meddled with.

In a moment I felt perfectly certain that by hook or by crook he would contrive an excuse for getting it out and asking me a question about Sister.

For a moment my head seemed to spin round. Suppose this man had been in some way connected with her past life! Suppose it were to be from him that she was hiding! It might be an absurd idea, but it came into my head, and with it the resolve that I would

Digitized by Google

never, never betray Sister to him—not even if I had to tell a lie about it!

I didn't want to say a word that was false. I hated untruth, and knew that nothing could justify a lie. But then Sister had trusted us; she had been our friend. I could not be the means of betraying her. It might be the wildest fancy, of course, on my part. Mr. Clarence could not be the lover who had left her, for he had been a soldier. He could not have been that other man who persecuted her by his attentions, for he had been a doctor. But I knew very well that in Sister's life there must have been experiences which she might not have chosen to speak of. Perhaps this man, whom we none of us liked, and yet none could say why, had been in some way connected with her. At any rate, one thing was pretty clear to me: he must show me a very good reason before I would utter one single word which could betray Sister's whereabouts. I did not trust him—I did not much like him. If he had some interest in her, I felt a strong suspicion that it would be one she would repudiate and shrink from.

I tried to think whether I had ever mentioned the name of Clarence to Sister, but I did not think I had. We did not talk to her about Garth, on account of the subject of officers being tabooed by us. The Lavenders was another tabooed subject. Both Roy and I had not forgiven Lady Lavender for slighting Sister, and we never named her or her household in our talks. No, I

Digitized by Google

did not think that the name of Clarence had ever crossed my lips. I made up my mind that it never should—to her. She was safe in the seclusion of The Hermitage. He would not see her there. I would never be the means of betraying her hiding-place.

It takes a long time to set all this down, but it shot through my mind in a very few seconds. Mr. Clarence was fidgeting with the books on the table, and talking airy nothings. I noticed him give a furtive glance across the room towards the colonel; and seeing him fully occupied right away from us, he drew forth the sketch-book, and again opened it in an idle way.

"Are you something of an artist, Miss Wyverne?" he said. "I was looking at these sketches before dinner. They struck me as being rather clever."

"I'm afraid that is your kindness, not my merit," I answered, hardly knowing what I was saying. "They are not for show, so please give me the book. I don't know how it came to be lying about."

"Oh, but let me look. That view of the bay is really very pretty, and you have caught the effect of the sunset glow remarkably well."

Then, perhaps noticing my ill-restrained impatience, and fearing lest I should take my book away by force, he turned to the head study, and even as he did so I saw his hands tremble.

"That is a good sketch too, I should say. Rather a striking face. Is it a portrait?"

Digitized by Google

"Oh no; you couldn't call it that—just a study from a head I once saw. Please give me my book, Mr. Clarence. I see they want me over there to play accompaniments. I don't want it to be lying about. I hate having my daubs looked at."

I got possession of the book, and took it away, throwing it into the music cupboard, before which I stooped down to get a song that had been asked for. I felt I was trembling all over, though I could not have told why.

I took very good care to give Mr. Clarence a wide berth for the rest of the evening.

Digitized by Google

CHAPTER XI.

A HUNTING MORNING.

"I SHOULD let the child go," said Aunt Joan.

I softly clapped my hands together. I could have hugged Aunt Joan as I heard these words.

"Do you think it safe—or suitable?" asked mother, still doubtfully. "I have rather a feeling against young girls hunting. And Cissy has never done so yet."

"Well, you and I used to hunt when we were girls," said Aunt Joan, smiling.

"Ah yes! in Ireland—and with our father. That makes a difference."

"Well, the child will have her two brothers, and of course a servant, in attendance. And if she promises to keep with Roy, she won't do any dangerous riding, you may be sure, as he can only take things quietly as yet. She has a clever little Devonshire horse, and she will enjoy the pretty sight of the meet. I should let her go for once, if I were you, Muriel. She has been rather a little nun all her life. It is time she saw something more of the world; and Garth will look well after them both."

Digitized by Google

Mother looked at me and smiled.

"Do you want very much to go, little one?"

"Oh yes, mother, if you do not mind," I cried. "I don't care about hunting so much—I mean not if it is dangerous at all. But I should like to see the hunt and be at the meet; and as Garth wants to take me, it all seems so easy. But, of course, if you don't like me to go, I won't say anything more."

But I thought I saw compliance already in mother's smile. I was pretty certain she would never hold out if Aunt Joan were in favour of the plan. Aunt Joan hated the modern fast girl with a hatred that was sometimes quite amusing to note, when we got her on the subject; but, on the other hand, she did not approve of girls being too much shut up and watched over. She thought we ought to be made to think for ourselves and act for ourselves.

"Directly a girl marries, she has a whole household more or less depending upon her judgment and experience. How is she to take the plunge with any chance of success if she is kept like a child in the nursery until the change is actually made? Let her learn to think and to decide before the need arises. Give her liberty; only take care it does not become licence."

That was Aunt Joan's theory, and I think she must have been impressing upon mother that I was still rather much a child in my ways. In a way I think it was true; for I had seen very little, and been out very little,

Digitized by Google

and my life seemed bounded almost entirely by the limits of Fair Haven.

Just within these last few weeks my horizon had suddenly widened. There was Sister, in whom I was keenly interested, and about whom I was always speculating and building up romances; then there was Amy's lover, who seemed to have some mysterious link with Sister, and whose expression as he looked at her portrait I could never forget. I had not mentioned that matter even to Roy. I felt absolutely unable to talk about my vague and possibly entirely groundless suppositions. I had not even been able to formulate any theory about them. But I thought of the matter constantly, and that made me exceedingly curious to find out all I could about Mr. Clarence, and learn whether he could have known Sister before.

Of course to her I never breathed a single word, and I took very good care that neither Roy nor I should ever breathe the name of Clarence in her presence. I felt perfectly certain it would trouble her to hear it, and as there was not the least chance of any meeting between them, I should have hated myself for doing anything to disturb the calm which had settled upon her life.

As it chanced, too, we seldom saw Sister during those weeks. The weather was very boisterous, and the difficulty of transit across the harbour was considerable. Mother was anxious when we were out on

Digitized by Google

the water during a high wind, and Sister herself scolded us for coming across in stormy weather.

This was provoking for us; but we made the best we could of such visits as we were able to pay. Sister was always as sweet and fascinating as possible when we could get across to her; but as the days grew shorter and shorter our chances became fewer, and we had perforce to look forward to the spring again, when we should be able to come and go at will.

Other interests were coming into my life too just now, and amongst these were Garth's frequent flying visits, and the invitations he often brought with him for some little bit of amusement got up at Watchet Bay either by the military or the civilians, in which all alike joined.

Aunt Joan was very kind in taking me to the different functions, and by this time I knew more people in Watchet Bay than I had done in all the years of my life before. I knew most of the officers, too, and found many of them very amusing and pleasant. But both Roy and I agreed in liking Colonel Clarence the best of all; and he was always kind to me, no doubt because I was Garth's sister, and Garth was his especial friend.

The last invitation we had received was for a meet of the hounds half-way between here and Watchet Bay. Our country was not a very good one for hunting. It was too rugged and broken; but, of course, there were

Digitized by Google

various packs of hounds, and this meet was to be an unusually large one, owing to the presence of so many of the officers of the regiment.

Garth had written to mother offering to take care of me if she would let me go; and I was all eagerness to see the sight, although hunting had not been one of the amusements permitted to me, nor had I, with no brother to depend on for escort, particularly regretted mother's decision on the point. I was very fond of riding all over the country, and I had a capital little horse, strong of limb and sound of wind, who would carry me anywhere, over ditches, and through or over hedges; who never stumbled, and never was baffled. He and I knew the country all round as well as any huntsman or whipper-in could do. I felt quite sure that where the huntsmen and hounds led, there we could follow. It was much more likely that I should have to keep back for Garth than Garth for me. I was not at all afraid of spoiling his fun.

Roy was eager to go himself, and, of course, eager that I should go too. Roy had been getting on very well all this time, and could now walk without any stick, and ride without inconvenience. Of course he had to do both in moderation, and he became tired sooner than before; but he was always in excellent spirits, and that carried him along famously. I greatly enjoyed having him at home, instead of seeing him pack up and go back to Oxford in October as heretofore.

Digitized by Google

"Bravo Aunt Joan!" cried Roy, when I came dancing in with the news that her approval had won mother's consent to our going to the meet. "Didn't I tell you she was a real trump! I don't think you half believed it, though, till she came."

"Well, I believe it now. I'm very fond indeed of Aunt Joan. I should like to be like her when I get older, but I know I shall never be half as sensible."

The morning of the hunt was as fine and balmy as heart could wish—a soft, hazy November day, with the mists clearing away gradually before the darting sunbeams, the harbour lying blue and smiling beneath the brightening sky, the green moorlands above glistening with dew, the fresh saltness in the wind giving zest and crispness to everything.

I had a new riding-habit. Aunt Joan had made rather a fuss a few weeks back on seeing my wardrobe, and since then I had had quite a lot of new clothes sent down from London. I felt very smart and fashionable as I donned my new gear, and actually tied a little scarlet tie round my throat over my snowy habit shirt, to give a touch of the huntsman's colour to my get-up. Roy put on his pink for the first time that season; and we rode off together in high spirits, to meet Garth at an appointed spot some short distance from the meet.

"Are any of the Lavenders going?" I asked Roy as

Digitized by Google

we rode away, waving farewells to Aunt Joan, who had come to see us off.

"I don't know. I daresay some of them will turn up. I should think her ladyship would drive across with Amy; but I don't think it's much in Hilda's line. She is taking another tack altogether, and will be down at the hospital most likely. Nigel is not a great Nimrod either. I don't know if he will show up, I'm sure."

"Do you think Colonel Clarence will be there?" was my next question.

"I should think so," answered Roy; "he is generally to be seen where Garth goes."

"And Mr. Clarence?"

"Oh, I don't know about him. One never knows where he will turn up. Sometimes he's at the Lavenders', and sometimes in this place or the other. Perhaps if Amy shows up he will come to meet them, if he isn't with them."

"I don't like Mr. Clarence," I said, rather hotly.

"I know you don't. He's not my style of man either; but I can never see that there's any harm in him."

"I don't like his eyes; they seem to me shifty. Do you notice that he never looks anybody straight in the face?"

"Yes. It's an ugly-looking trick always; but it may be only a trick. I've known some quite nice fellows

Digitized by Google

who had it. It seems born in some people; it may be a sort of shyness which we can't understand."

"I don't think Mr. Clarence is shy."

"I don't know; sometimes I think he is. That night when Garth and the colonel dined with us first, I thought he was very shy indeed. The colonel got beside him after you had gone, and wanted to make him talk about a lot of things. But he could hardly get anything out of him. I was sitting opposite, and I couldn't help watching them both. They are alike in feature, and so absolutely different in expression; and one of them seemed so open and eager, and the other just as tight as wax. It was quite odd to see him."

"I think he's a nasty fellow!" I cried, "and I wish Amy wasn't engaged to him."

"She seems satisfied with her bargain at least."

"Oh, Amy would be satisfied with anything!" I answered, with a little half-unconscious scorn; "but Hilda is not satisfied at all. She says that Amy doesn't know anything about Mr. Clarence's past life. He never speaks of it—only a few bald facts. He makes love to her all day—it's all billing and cooing; but when it comes to getting at the man himself, from what Hilda can make out such a thing never enters Amy's pretty silly little head!"

"Perhaps she is wise," answered Roy, with a touch of unconscious satire; "there are cases where ignorance is bliss."

Digitized by Google

"Yes; but what about afterwards—when you are going to marry the creature?" I asked.

Roy shook his head. He had no suggestion to offer; and I once more recalled the look upon the handsome, inscrutable face as he stood looking at Sister's portrait in my sketch-book. They must have met before. There must have been something to cause that ghastly paleness which overspread his face. And it seemed to me that a man who could look like that must have a story to tell which his affianced wife had the right to know. I thought he had most likely been in love with Sister sometime, and had been refused by her. But surely a man ought to tell the woman he is going to marry if he had loved before!

Roy broke in upon my musings with another train of thought.

"Talking of Hilda, did it ever strike you that there was anything between her and old Hawke?"

"O Roy, I never thought of such a thing!"

"Well, I often did. Perhaps it's all fancy. But something has come over Hilda. She's as different as possible from what she was before. And I have thought him a bit different too. I never knew him take so kindly to society before."

"I don't think Lady Lavender would care about that," I said; "I don't think Mr. Hawke was much to her taste."

"Perhaps not; but she may find one of these days

Digitized by Google

that Hilda will consult her own taste rather than her mother's," answered Roy, laughing; "and Nigel would back her through thick and thin."

"I don't know. Nigel stands in pretty good awe of his mamma," I answered, with a little grimace; "I always think those two hang together."

"You are always nasty to Nigel," remarked Roy equably; "but you'll see differently some day."

At that moment we rounded a bend in the road, and there were Garth and Colonel Clarence riding leisurely forth to meet us. We exchanged greetings, and rode on all together to the appointed place, soon leaving the regular road and taking to the sweep of turf which led upwards and onwards to the open crest of downland, where already we could see a muster of horses and hounds.

It was a pretty sight when we reached the ridge, and a very large field, too, for our part of the world. There was a grass cart-track by which quite a number of carriages had been able to find their way to the place; and amongst these I soon singled out that of Lady Lavender, who sat smiling and gracious, with Amy at her side.

Both Garth and the colonel had to pay their respects to this local autocrat, and whilst they stood talking beside the carriage (an orderly having appeared, as if by magic, to hold their horses), Amy saw me, and signalled to me to come and speak to her. I rode up,

Digitized by Google

therefore, to her side of the carriage, and we began to chat.

After a little talk about the scene before us, and the probable chances of the day, the girl suddenly said,—

"O Cissy, I want you to lend me your sketch-book."

The request almost made me jump, and I suppose my face must have betrayed some astonishment, for Amy laughed and went on,—

"You needn't look so scared. I know you don't like showing your sketches; but I shan't show them. It is only that Edward took rather a fancy to one—the harbour, I think it was, and the sunset, and asked me if I could get the book and copy it for him. I was sure you would not mind."

"Oh no, I don't mind that," I answered, speaking very slowly.

"I said I knew you wouldn't. Edward was rather struck by your talent. He happened to get hold of your book the other evening. He said you had rather a striking head there, too, and asked who it was. I didn't know. Who was it, Cissy?"

Now I had already taken the precaution to cut that leaf upon which I had sketched Sister's head clean out of my sketch-book. I hardly know why I did this, but I had done it that very night after reaching my room. There was no other sketch of her; the only other head was that of a girl friend who had stayed at the Lavenders' earlier in the year, and who had a rather

Digitized by Google

picturesque appearance. I don't know whether I was justified in my next words (of course I knew very well what head it was that had attracted Mr. Clarence's notice), but I replied, with as candid an air as I could assume,—

"Oh, there is a head of Clare Mostyn in it. I drew her once when she came down to spend the day. I think it is rather a good likeness. You will see when you get the book."

Amy was perfectly satisfied; and I soon took the opportunity of drawing back to let other friends come up and talk to her. Amy was looking exceedingly pretty, wrapped up in her furs, her face flushed to the tint of a delicate blush rose, and her blue eyes very bright and shining. Happiness certainly agreed with little Amy, and I felt a sort of fierce pity growing up in my heart lest she should be throwing herself away upon a man unworthy of her.

This request for the sketch-book struck me as being very odd. It confirmed all I had fancied before. Mr. Clarence *was* on the track of something in his desire to know more about Sister. It might be foolish of me, it might even be wrong, but the more I grew convinced of this, the more resolved did I become that he should never, never know anything about her through word or act of mine. I should have felt like a base betrayer if I had been the means of putting the clue into his hands. He *might* hear her name at any moment, of course; but

Digitized by Google

this was not very likely, as Sister was never spoken of at the Lavenders'. Also Lucas is not an uncommon name, and if he were to hear it, he might not suspect the truth. Lady Lavender would only speak of her as somebody quite beneath her world.

Roy came riding up to say that the field was beginning to move, so I reined back and joined him; and almost immediately up rode Garth and the colonel, who were well mounted, but only on their chargers. They had neither of them thought it worth while to purchase or hire hunters.

"We shall put ourselves under your orders," said Garth, looking at the wiry little creatures Roy and I rode; "you must take pity on our ignorance, and show us the best line. We will do our best to keep with you; but our horses are new to this country, though they have done a bit of hunting now and again."

We were quite ready to be the pioneers of the party, and soon saw the line the first fox was going to take. Roy had often been out with the hounds, and I had many times watched from afar. We took short cuts where the bulk of the field made rounds, so we kept well to the front for two or three hours, by which time Roy began to look tired, and the chargers seemed to think they had done their duty.

"The inner man says 'lunch,'" remarked Garth, as we pulled up at last and let the hunt recede from view. "We can get it, too, at that village over there. I re-

Digitized by Google

member there used to be a good little inn where you could get an excellent steak or eggs and bacon done to perfection."

"Either would be welcome now," said the colonel. "Well, Miss Wyverne, you have showed us some very good running. I wish I could ride one of those clever little west-country horses. They do their work so prettily and cleanly. It is an education to see them at it. I am sorry if we have hindered you from being in at the death."

"I should hate the death," I answered; "I can't bear seeing anything killed after such a gallant struggle for life. I should be like the woman who hid the tired fox in the cradle, and begged the huntsman who looked in not to wake the baby! I like the run, and watching the cleverness of the hounds, but that is enough for me."

We had reached the village almost as we finished speaking, and the inn provided us with an excellent lunch. Roy dozed on the sofa whilst it was preparing, and Garth went off to renew acquaintance with the blacksmith, who had been one of his boyhood's friends.

The colonel and I sat by the fire in the parlour and talked of many things. It was natural enough that Mr. Clarence's name should presently come up. I hardly know how I found boldness to frame my next words, but I was so anxious to know.

"Colonel Clarence, do you mind telling me about your

Digitized by Google

cousin. You know he is going to marry a great friend of mine. It makes me curious. I want to know what sort of a man he is."

The colonel smiled very kindly as he responded,—

"I suppose you want to ask the young lady's stock question—Is he nice?"

I laughed, but I also nodded my head.

"I should very much like to know that he was a thoroughly nice man. Do you think he is?"

"I do," answered the colonel at once, and with a heartiness that almost surprised me. "He and I were brought up like brothers, and he stood by me like a brother in the one great sorrow of my life. He has managed my affairs for me whilst I have been away. I have trusted everything to him, and he has shown me much generous kindness; for until recently I was a poor man, whilst he has always been well-to-do. I owe much to Edward's unfailing liberality. Yes, I think I can answer your question without any hesitation at all."

Certainly this was wonderfully satisfactory. Perhaps I had been on a wild-goose chase after all!

"But you have been away a great many years, have you not?"

"Yes; I have had a longer spell of foreign service than often falls to one man. It was my own doing. I might have come home many years ago; but I exchanged with another officer, who found it very difficult to take his term of foreign service. That is how I got into your

Digitized by Google

brother's regiment, and so out of touch with the old country. As a matter of fact it suited me very well, and Edward looked after everything for me here. He is a thoroughly good fellow, and I think your young friend is fortunate in her choice."

"You think he cares for her? She is very, very fond of him. But I never can tell about men; they are so different from us."

He smiled very kindly; I was feeling pleasantly intimate by that time. Colonel Clarence was not a young man; he must have been forty, and there was a plentiful admixture of grey in the brown hair on his temples. He was a very fine, soldierly man, but the sort of man to whom one could talk freely, or I could not have put such frank questions.

"I am sure he cares for her very much indeed, and I am very glad of it. A hearty, wholesome love is a very good thing for any man. I have often been surprised that Edward has remained a bachelor so long. I am exceedingly glad that he has found so charming a wife at last."

"Why didn't he marry before?" I asked.

"I suppose the right lady had not appeared."

"Then he has not been in love before?"

The colonel smiled at my question, and said,—

"At least he has not told me if he has, and I think we tell each other most things."

I didn't know how to ask anything more; indeed I

Digitized by Google

felt I had asked perhaps more than I had any right to do. Colonel Clarence seemed to have fallen into a brown-study, looking into the leaping fire of pine logs. I looked at him once or twice, and again I was certain that I caught a look of underlying melancholy in his eyes. It was the look I had surprised in them once before, early in our acquaintance, and which had made me think of Sister.

I wished, with a sense of rebellion in my heart, that life were not always inclined to play shabby tricks upon the nicest people. How much sorrow and suffering Sister had passed through! And now it seemed to me that I saw the same sort of shadow in this nice Colonel Clarence's eyes. And then such lots of uninteresting nobodies never had any troubles at all; so in my youthful inexperience I said. It did not seem at all fair. I wished I could arrange things differently!

When the colonel had left us, and Garth and I were riding on together, Roy bringing up the rear, as the lane was too narrow to admit of our all riding abreast, I said to him suddenly,—

"Why did Colonel Clarence have such a long spell of foreign service? Why didn't he want to come home—like other men?"

"How do you know he did, Cissy?"

"He told me so himself. I like him so much, Garth; but I think sometimes he looks very sad."

"Yes, I know what you mean. I daresay it had

Digitized by Google

something to do with his staying away so long. I don't know the ins and outs of the story, but he was jilted once by the woman he was to have married. It cut him up terribly, they say; and he went off, and has only quite recently cared to come back. But he is a splendid soldier. He has got no end of decorations, as you know. It is sometimes that an affair of that sort is the making of one of England's heroes. Men who value life but little will lead a forlorn hope with dauntless courage, as he has done."

I was silent awhile, and then burst out,—

"Oh, it is hard, it is hard!"

"What is?"

"Why, that the fine noble men go and engage themselves to heartless women, who break their hearts; and that the sweet and beautiful women care for horrid men, who throw them over, and go off and never care a bit!"

Garth looked at me in some surprise and amusement, as well he might, knowing nothing about the Sister episode; but Roy rode up at that moment and diverted the talk; whilst I said almost fiercely in my heart,—

"Oh, why couldn't Sister and Colonel Clarence have cared for one another!"

Digitized by Google

CHAPTER XII.

HILDA'S TRIAL.

ROY looked up from a letter he was reading, and his face was very bright and animated.

"Bravo old Hawke!" he exclaimed.

"What is it?" I asked.

But Roy was looking across at Aunt Joan, whose face also expressed curiosity and interest.

"He's got that professorship!" he cried, speaking directly to her. "Do you remember his talking about it to us in the summer, and saying it was likely soon to be vacant? He did not think then that he had much chance. But he's got it. Hurrah! Three cheers for old Hawke!"

"I am very glad," answered Aunt Joan heartily; "he deserves to get on, and I think he will. I suppose it will make a considerable addition to his income?"

"Very considerable, I should say. It's rather a good thing to get. And there's the prestige too; that will do him good. Nothing succeeds like success. I must write and congratulate the old boy!"

Digitized by Google

"Then give him my congratulations also," said Aunt Joan; "I think he well deserves success. He will do honour to his calling, I am sure."

"Yes, that he will!" cried Roy eagerly. "He is a good fellow, take the words as you will. I am awfully glad. I hope he'll come back here at Christmas, so that we can felicitate him to his face."

"Is there any chance of it?"

"Nigel asked him; but I don't think it was settled. Sometimes he took pupils in vacation; but he won't have to do that sort of thing now. Well, I am awfully glad! I'd go up and talk to Nigel about it, but he isn't at home, is he?"

"No; he's gone off to see after some of his philanthropic fads in other places!" I answered. "He's got his farm on the brain, now that the cottage hospital is floated and working well. Hilda told me he had gone to dig out some more country labourers who had drifted into the towns, and were starving there, and bring them out and set them to work. He has room for several more, and has gone to seek them."

"Well, if that's a 'fad,' then commend me to fads!" said Roy, a little hotly.

I couldn't help rather poking up Roy on the subject of Nigel, for whom he was really beginning to entertain a kind of enthusiasm. I myself was gradually coming round to the conviction that Nigel was a very different sort of man from the creature I had been pleased to

Digitized by Google

picture him all these years; but I wasn't going to have Roy crowing over me, so I still kept up my attitude of critical flippancy.

"Nigel has embarked upon a difficult crusade," remarked Aunt Joan; "but if he succeeds, he will be doing a thing that badly needs doing in these days—drafting off from the overcrowded towns the real sons of the soil, who only pine and perish there, and getting them upon the land again, which is in danger of passing out of cultivation for want of able farmers to direct things. If he can prove in a small way that there is still a field for the English farmer in fruit-growing, poultry and dairy farming, and market-gardening, he may do something towards solving one of the problems of the times, and save many from sinking below the waves, as thousands are doing year by year. It is not a thing to laugh at, Cissy. If I had Nigel's youth and energy and land, I would do it myself. I am strongly of opinion that it is nonsense to talk of land as some folks are doing now, seeing what millions of eggs and what quantities of butter we have to import yearly."

I was, however, much too excited to care about discussing any problems that day; for I was about to start off with Aunt Joan for a four or five days' visit to Hurst Royal. I had never seen Aunt Joan's home yet, though Roy had described it to me in glowing colours. Garth was to be at home for a short time, and it had pleased mother to suggest that I should go back with

Digitized by Google

Aunt Joan when she returned upon one of her visits of inspection to her own domain. She would stay ten days or a fortnight, and then come back to us for Christmas; but I should stay only part of the time, and then return home again, as I should not like to be so long away from mother and Roy.

However, as leaving home for even a few days was quite an event in my life, I was a good deal excited, and had no thought to give to other matters, not even to Mr. Hawke's good fortune, though I was exceedingly glad to hear of it.

Life had changed a good deal for me latterly. It was so much more full, and had so many more interests.

To begin with, there was Sister, and although I had not seen very much of her during these past winter weeks, still it was a constant source of satisfaction to feel that she was there; and whenever Roy and I could take the boat across and spend a few hours with her, we were sure of a warm welcome, and invariably fell under the spell of her fascinations afresh.

I was no nearer to any solution of the puzzle which I often turned over in my mind with regard to Mr. Clarence and his recognition of Sister's face in my sketch. I never breathed a word upon the subject to her, nor did she ever again speak of her past life and its sorrows.

Sometimes I felt that I should like to tell somebody and ask advice—whether I ought to speak or not;

Digitized by Google

whether it could by any chance be doing harm to Sister or to anybody else to keep silence. I had misgivings and perplexities which often beset me; and yet I never found courage to broach the subject, even to Roy. It seemed to me almost as though I had no right to mention it; as though I had surprised it unawares, and that it was dishonourable to betray it. And then I was always haunted by the fear that it might bring suffering upon Sister. She seemed tranquil and happy now, in her quiet way, secluded in that peaceful place, shut away from the world without. I could not bear to be the means of disturbing that happiness. I could not make up my mind to run the risk of speaking. Besides, Mr. Clarence had gone away now, and the matter had thus slipped into a secondary place.

We were all of us interesting ourselves a good deal over our scheme of trying to train young servants in Aunt Joan's method. Mother had let me have one down—the daughter of a very nice, respectable woman who had come to the hospital, and who was most thankful to find such a home for a girl of sixteen, who would otherwise have had to go as a mere "slavy" to some lodging-house keeper, or have tried to find a post "in business," as they called it. The mother, who had been in good service in her unmarried days, keenly appreciated the advantages of a thorough training in a good house; and Janet came to us. She was rather a pretty girl, and rather wild and full of pranks downstairs, I heard.

Digitized by Google

When permitted to enter my room, she was gravity and decorum itself. I wanted to teach her how I liked my things put, and feel that I helped to train her a little myself. She often rather reminded me of Topsy in "Uncle Tom's Cabin:" she was so very demure and respectful in my presence; yet there was a subdued twinkle in her eyes which belied her gravity, and I often had a sort of feeling that she was laughing in her sleeve at my efforts to instil information.

"Be kind to her, but do not encourage familiarity," Aunt Joan had warned me. "Let her see that you can be her friend and yet be her mistress too. Win her respect, and you will get her affection too. Be wise as well as kind."

I was trying hard to follow this advice, but I was not always sure if I succeeded very well. My efforts at being friendly were rather apt to encourage Janet in habits of gossip, which I did not quite know how to put down without seeming to snub her; and the same thing applied to the confidences she was beginning to make me. I did not always know where I should encourage and where check her. Altogether I often sighed for more wisdom, and wished a hundred times a day that I could only be more like Sister.

For Sister had taken one of our other patients' girls into her house, which I think was a very real act of kindness. This poor girl had already tried to make a living in a number of different ways, even selling flowers

Digitized by Google

in the street; but she was delicate, and she was possessed of a difficult temperament, and nothing had lasted long with her. She and her mother were both becoming down-hearted, and the poor woman had expressed a very real anxiety as to the ultimate fate of the girl.

"Send her to me," Sister had said when she heard of this. Sister did sometimes visit the cottage hospital, but never by appointment or arrangement. I had never seen her there. She would slip over by the ferry some evening, often just after dusk, pay her visit, and be gone before anybody knew of it.

"But she is a rare 'un, that she is!" the people would tell us afterwards; and it was to her that this poor woman had unburdened herself most fully with regard to her unsatisfactory daughter.

"Send her to me," Sister had said; "I will see what can be done for her."

And now Rose was an inmate of The Hermitage, and I think I never admired Sister more than I did when I saw her treatment of this daughter of the city streets. How did she know, I asked myself a dozen times a day, just what to say and how to say it? She kept the girl in subjection, yet she was as gentle and sweet in her manner towards her as she was to all the world. There was an indescribable firmness in her method which I felt through every fibre of my being, and yet she never used a harsh word. The girl already felt towards Sister an adoring love. I felt perfectly certain that this would

Digitized by Google

be the means of saving her from the perils her mother had feared for her, and of strengthening her alike in body, soul, and spirit.

And now I was on my way to Hurst Royal, to see Aunt Joan and her home and her ways. I wish I had time and space to tell all that I saw and learned there. I fell in love with the delicious old house and its lovely gardens, as I certainly never expected to do even after Roy's descriptions. It was not a large or imposing place, but oh, it was so pretty! and the quaint old garden was one where you could wander for ever unweariedly, and always find something fresh to look at and admire—at least if you knew anything about flowers and gardening, or had Aunt Joan with you.

But Hurst Royal does not belong to my story, and so I must pass over in silence the days spent there. I learned a good deal that was afterwards perhaps valuable to me; but when we are young we have to assimilate as well as to learn, and that is a longer process altogether.

I stayed five days, and went back with considerable regret; but, as Aunt Joan said, I must come again in the summer, when the garden was in full dress. This I gladly promised to do, if mother could spare me; for I was very fond of Aunt Joan by this time, and it was a real pleasure and education to be with her.

The day after my return home, Hilda Lavender came down to see me. Perhaps I have not made it very clear

Digitized by Google

in telling my story that Hilda and I had become much greater friends during these past months than we had ever been since we were quite children. We had interests in common now, and I had begun to have a great respect for Hilda. She was so much in earnest, and what she did was done so thoroughly and well. I often envied her this power of application, in which I felt myself very deficient.

When she came, she found me in anything but a pleasant frame of mind. Truth to tell, I had almost been crying, and she saw it at once.

"What is the matter, Cissy dear?" she asked kindly.

"Oh, I am so angry and disappointed with Janet!" I cried. "I feel as though I would never have her near my things again. I told her to make everything very nice whilst I was away, and tidy my drawers and places out; and so she has, with a vengeance! Do you know she has been trying on my hats, and pulling them about; and I don't know what besides. I feel as though I could never put on anything again! It is horrid—it is disgusting! And I believe she would have lied about it if I had not been so perfectly sure that she knew it would be no good."

"How did you know?"

"Oh, she had bent them so—twisted the brims; and, besides, there were some of her hairs sticking to the brim of one. It's disgusting, Hilda! It makes me sick! And I had been so kind to her! I feel like

Digitized by Google

turning her straight out of the house, and having a big bonfire of all my clothes!"

Hilda did not laugh at me; she was full of sympathy and concern.

"No, don't lose heart so soon, Cissy. It is very disappointing and disagreeable. But, after all, when we go to buy hats we know that the sale-girls have often put them on first. Janet, with all her faults, is beautifully clean in her person. It is no excuse for her, but it is a little consolation for you. And I am glad she did not try to stand you out with a falsehood. That is something to be thankful for. I should punish her by not letting her come into your room for a few weeks, but not by being unkind."

As Hilda talked I grew quieter, and finally said I supposed Janet must stay, and that I should not worry mother about it. But I did not think I was at all the right sort of person to try to do good works. I was always coming to grief, and everything went wrong.

It was some considerable time before I began to understand and notice that Hilda had some trouble of her own to-day. I was so engrossed in my own small affairs that her pale cheeks and dark-rimmed eyes passed unheeded for quite a long time. It was not until I had pretty well exhausted my own grievances that I had leisure to observe this; then I suddenly exclaimed,—

"Why, Hilda, you look as if you had been crying all night!"

Digitized by Google

She tried to smile, but her lips trembled, and in a moment I felt what a thoughtless, selfish wretch I had been, and I threw my arms about her neck.

"O Hilda, what is it? You are in trouble! Why didn't you tell me so? Why did you let me go on boring you about Janet? I am so selfish, and never think of anything but my own silly little affairs. But I am so sorry. Do tell me what is the matter. Is there anything I can do?"

Hilda's eyes brimmed over, but she spoke quietly.

"No, no, dear. It does me good to talk of other things. I don't want always to be thinking of it, and yet it is never out of my mind. I came down here to see you, to try to get rid of the burden for a little while."

I pulled her close down beside me on the sofa. I had forgotten all about my own vexation now. Here was something altogether deeper and more important. I was all eagerness to know.

"What is it, Hilda? you will tell me, won't you?"

She looked down and clasped and unclasped her hands nervously. I suddenly had an inspiration.

"O Hilda, is it about Mr. Hawke?"

She looked at me with almost startled eyes.

"Cissy! what do you know about it?"

"Nothing—only that Roy once said he thought that Mr. Hawke cared for you; and then there is this professorship, you know."

Digitized by Google

"You heard of that, of course?"

"Yes—the day I went away. O Hilda, do tell me!"

"He wrote to me a few days afterwards," she said very slowly. "He asked me to marry him. He wrote to mamma, too, and explained his position. He is not rich, but he is very comfortable; and he leads a beautiful life, I think. He will do a great work. It would have been a great privilege to share it; but—but—"

Her voice almost broke, and my impatience could not be restrained. I cried eagerly,—

"But what, Hilda—what is the difficulty?"

"Mamma will not hear of it," concluded Hilda softly.

Lady Lavender indeed! All my old scorn and enmity rose up in a moment. It was with difficulty I controlled some very improper words which rushed to my lips. Instead of uttering them, however, I was silent for a few moments, and then said,—

"But you care for him, Hilda?"

She bent her head. Hilda was not one who would lightly speak of her love. I knew better by the flush on her cheek and the dewy light in her eyes how much she cared.

"But if you love him and he loves you, what does anything else matter?" I cried.

"Mother will not hear of it," repeated Hilda sadly. "She has written to tell him so. She has forbidden me to write to him at all."

The tears fell fast, though Hilda did not lose her

Digitized by Google

self-control or sob aloud. My heart was full of indignation.

"But, Hilda, you are of age. You have even got your own fortune. You are not dependent upon your mother in any way. Why do you not assert yourself?"

Hilda's answer was long in coming. As I have said, she was not a girl who found it easy to speak of her deeper feelings.

"I have thought about it every way," she said, in a very low voice. "I have thought about it night and day; and I have prayed about it—oh, how I have prayed!—that I may do right. My mother may be wrong, Cissy. It seems to me that she is in this case; but yet that scarcely seems reason enough why I should disobey and defy her."

I could not see it in that light. I had never disobeyed my own mother; but then she was mother, and this was Lady Lavender! It was, perhaps, difficult for me to see with Hilda's eyes. I broke out almost fiercely,—

"What right has she to interfere? What right has she to break your heart?"

But Hilda checked the flow of her tears, and answered gravely,—

"You must not speak to me of my mother quite like that, Cissy. I know you do not like her very much; but remember she is my mother, and that I owe to her the same obedience and love that you owe to yours."

Digitized by Google

"I beg your pardon," I said at once instinctively; and feeling that I had put myself in the wrong, I tried hard to keep within bounds for the future.

"But why will she not consider it? Did she not like Mr. Hawke? Is there anything against him?"

"No; that is where I think mother is wrong. There is nothing against him. But he is not rich, and he does not come of any particular family; and if I married him I should be 'buried alive in Oxford,' as she says; and mother thinks that would be a dreadful sort of life for anybody."

"But you would like it?"

"I should love it!" she answered, with sudden fervour. "When he used to talk about it, I used to think what a beautiful life it could be. I don't care for grandeur. I love books and the talk of clever men, and just the things I should get. And with *him* anything, everything would be beautiful—"

She paused, biting her lip hard. I put my arm round her neck in token of sympathy, but I kept down my rising flood of anger.

"Have you told your mother all that?"

"As well as I could. Mother is not very easy to talk to when you oppose her." I knew this well by experience and by hearsay. "I tried to make her understand that I was not like Amy, and that the same things did not attract us; but—"

"Well, what?"

Digitized by Google

"I could not convince her. It was just a passing fancy, she said. Girls always had several fancies of one sort or another. It would pass away, and I should soon find I had made a great mistake. It would be wrong of her, she said, to give way to me now. I had been used to a different world, and I should make a great error in leaving it. I can't say all she said. You know mother has a convincing way with her—she can silence you; but I know in my heart that it is no mere fancy. I was so weary of the old life even before I saw Mr. Hawke and thought of anything different; but mother cannot believe that."

"And what does Amy say?"

"Oh, Amy is kind and sympathetic, but she thinks like mother. I don't think Amy ever cared for Mr. Hawke one bit. She cannot understand how I do. She thought him plain and awkward and unattractive. She keeps saying that I shall soon forget, and that it will all die down, and somebody better will turn up. Poor Amy! she does her best to offer consolation, even to saying that being engaged isn't always quite as delightful as it seems at first."

"What makes her say that?" I asked, a little startled, for Amy's affairs had always seemed to flow so very smoothly.

"I don't quite know," answered Hilda; "I have fancied that Amy has not been quite so uncloudedly happy the last little bit. She does not say anything,

Digitized by Google

and mother does not seem troubled in any way; but I have had my own fancies."

"What have you fancied?"

"Nothing very definite. But Mr. Clarence was certainly rather grave and preoccupied at the end of his visit. He gave me the impression of having something on his mind; but I don't think he confided in Amy. I don't think she noticed it as soon as I did. It may be because Colonel Clarence is near—did you notice that evening they met how ghastly he grew? There is some secret in his life, I am certain, and Colonel Clarence is concerned in it. But what it is I cannot imagine, and certainly he has not confided in Amy."

This information diverted my mind for a little while from Hilda's affairs; but I could not forget them long, and by-and-by I brought the conversation back to them.

"Then are you not even going to write to Mr. Hawke? Hilda, I think there are limits to obedience—I really do. When a man offers you everything in the world that he has, he deserves to have your own reply, not your mother's!"

Hilda winced at my words; but I was not sorry. I thought she was weak there.

"I shall speak with Nigel when he gets back," she said.

I put my chin into the air rather contemptuously.

"Nigel will back mamma," I murmured under my breath. I do not know whether Hilda heard.

Digitized by Google

"Nigel will tell me what is right to do," said Hilda. "At present it would be such a difficult letter that I do not know how to write it."

"He deserves to know that you love him," I said.

"But if I cannot marry him, would it not be the worse pain?"

"I should tell him the truth. I think he deserves to know. Let him know that Lady Lavender is ambitious, that—"

I stopped short. Partizanship was carrying me too far again. But Hilda was not angry. She knew I loved her and was grieved and moved on her account. She pressed my hand in token of sympathy, but said quietly,—

"I must not say anything to shame my mother."

I heaved an impatient sigh. I felt like writing a letter myself. Mr. Hawke might perhaps guess that it was Lady Lavender who was the stumbling-block; but might not her letter be so artfully worded as to imply that it expressed her daughter's sentiments too? I knew that Lady Lavender could be diplomatic; I was not certain how far her diplomacy would carry her in an affair like this.

I heaved a rebellious sigh. The whole thing seemed to me to be very unsatisfactory.

"Then you are to be made miserable for life, and his life spoiled too, because—"

"His life will not be spoiled it is far too full of noble

Digitized by Google

work," answered Hilda, with spirit; "and I shall not—I will not be miserable for life. When there is so much work to be done, it is wrong to give too much thought to our own individual sorrows. Besides, Cissy, other girls have had to bear disappointment—have had to wait for their happiness before me. Mother objects to Eric as a husband for me now, but she may not object always. When she finds that I can care for nobody else, perhaps she will feel differently. She thinks it just a passing fancy now. When she finds out what it really is, that may change her."

"And you will not let her choose another husband for you, and think it your duty to marry him?" I asked.

Hilda half smiled, but she looked at me with a little reproach in her eyes, and I was half ashamed of myself.

"I think you do not quite understand, dear. The duty of obedience to parents is a very sacred one. One of the saddest signs of the times (Eric himself has said so) is the growing disregard amongst children and young people for the wishes of their parents. We do not choose our parents; they are given to us by God. We obey Him in them. God may use them in ways we do not understand to teach us submission and self-denial. My mother believes she is acting for my best welfare in forbidding this thing. It grieves me; but I shall not disobey her. Only I shall pray that she may see things differently. As to marrying without love, because she might think a match a good one, that is a totally dif-

Digitized by Google

ferent matter, as you can see. That would be taking false vows before God and man. Nothing could make that right. Nor would my mother ever wish such a thing, though for other reasons she might desire it. I think when Eric gets her letter he will understand. I am not afraid of his being deceived about me. I wish that I might have written myself; but I can wait till Nigel comes back. If he thinks that I should do so, he will get permission for it. I think he will see that part of the matter as I do. I should like to write to Eric just once."

I threw my arms round her neck and hugged her.

"How good you are! O Hilda, it seems to me that everybody is good except me! I never have any troubles or bothers or worries, except such little ones, and I get so cross and horrid over them; and other people have the most dreadful things happen to them, and they are so good and sweet through it all. It makes me so ashamed, I almost long for some trouble to come to me, to see if I could be good then."

Hilda returned my kiss warmly, but heaved a little sigh as she answered,—

"Don't wish that, Cissy; be thankful for the sunshine of your happy life. Do you know that I have often had a wish of that sort? I think perhaps it comes from a sort of pride—the desire to show what *we* could do if we were tempted. But it is a foolish wish; I think it is a wrong one, too. And then when

Digitized by Google

perhaps the trouble does come, oh how we wish we did not have it to bear!"

Hilda rose to go; she had been some time with me. She said it had "done her good" to talk it out; but I felt I had been a very imperfect sort of comforter.

"May I tell Roy about it?" I asked timidly, as we went downstairs together; and Hilda, after a little hesitation, said,—

"Yes."

When she was gone I flew to Roy with my tale, giving my opinion of Lady Lavender with a freedom that I rarely indulged even to Roy.

Rather to my surprise, instead of showing anger, concern, or sympathy, he listened to my story with a broad grin, and broke into a hearty peal of laughter at the end.

"Well, Roy, I don't think you're very kind to Hilda," I said. "It's no laughing matter with her, I can tell you!"

"Why, bless your heart, I'm laughing at the green goosishness of the whole show of you! Do you suppose for a moment that Nigel will let Hawke and Hilda be trampled upon like this by her ladyship? Not a bit of it. As soon as ever he gets back we shall all sing to a different tune!"

"O Roy, do you really think so?" I asked eagerly, but rather incredulously.

"I'm certain sure of it!" he answered, with a finality of tone that left me gasping but hopeful.

Digitized by Google

CHAPTER XIII.

MY FIRST BALL.

"WHY, Roy, they have changed the date of the ball!"

I spoke in some dismay, looking across at Roy, who had the same gilt-edged card upon his plate that had found its way to mine. But his was accompanied by a letter, and now he spoke, informing me of its contents.

"Yes, Garth has written. He says there was some muddle about the hall. They found out afterwards that they could not get it on the night they wanted. They can only have it on the twenty-third—just before Christmas, instead of just after. So they changed it before the cards were sent out."

"What a bother!" I exclaimed, rather dismayed.

"Why? what difference does it make to you?"

"Why, all the difference in the world! Who is to take me?"

"Aunt Joan, of course."

"Yes, you silly boy; so she would if it were on the

Digitized by Google

twenty-eighth, as Garth said it would be. But you know she does not come herself till Christmas Eve. How can she take me?"

I was feeling a good deal disturbed and put about. I had never yet been to a dance, and this regimental ball I had regarded as my *début* in society. We had talked about it a great deal. Aunt Joan had promised to be my chaperon. I had a new dress ordered for it; and now, was it going to turn out a fiasco after all?

Roy began to see the difficulties of the situation, and looked serious all in a minute.

"Wouldn't Aunt Joan come a few days earlier?"

"I don't know if she can," I answered, rather dismally. "You know she has such a lot of things to see to at Hurst Royal; and with Christmas coming on, it makes it more difficult to get away. I know when I heard all she had to do and to see to, I was almost ashamed that we had asked her to spend Christmas here. It seemed as though she could never get done. And, besides, there are teas and treats she gives to the old people and children. I don't know if she can be away from them."

Roy whistled and looked grave. This was evidently a new idea to him. I, remembering Aunt Joan's innumerable claims, felt, to say the least of it, very doubtful.

"After all," said Roy, who was meditating deeply, "it only means coming one day earlier."

"Well, if Aunt Joan could come the same day as the

Digitized by Google

ball, it would be only one day. But it seems rather much for anybody to do in this cold weather—a journey by rail and water, and then a long drive to Watchet Bay."

"I don't think Aunt Joan would mind that—if she could get away."

"Yes—if—"

And then we both fell musing; for I confess I did not feel certain that Aunt Joan could manage this, and to be disappointed of my ball did seem rather hard.

"What about Lady Lavender?" said Roy, rather doubtfully. "Would she be any good?"

I shook my head very decidedly.

"They are not at home, Roy; they do not come back till Christmas Eve either."

"I know," he answered; "but they will be at the ball, I suppose. They are only at the Grenvilles'. I expect they will send two or three carriages of people over from there. If I were to take you, couldn't I put you under Lady Lavender's wing when you got there?"

"No," I answered, very decidedly. "I won't be put into Lady Lavender's care. I'd rather not go at all than go with her."

Roy, who was singularly sweet-tempered, looked rather amazed at the heat with which I spoke.

"Whew!" he whistled; "you needn't get into such a taking. I only thought it might be a way out of the difficulty."

Digitized by Google

"I don't know if mother would let us arrange things that way, even if we wanted to," I said. "But I don't want. I've had enough of going about with Lady Lavender; I'll have no more of it. Since she has behaved so cruelly to Hilda, I don't feel as though I wanted to speak to her again. And even mother begins to say that I had better not be always seen with them. I shall be very disappointed about the ball if I can't go; but I won't go with Lady Lavender."

"Will you get your dress in time, do you think?"

"Oh yes; it is to come to-day or to-morrow, and mother's Madame has never disappointed us yet. I'm not afraid about that—only about Aunt Joan. I must go and talk to mother and ask her what she thinks."

Mother was full of interest and sympathy.

"I will write to Aunt Joan, dear, and ask her. I think she will be able to manage it. She has so much energy and capacity for getting through work; and I know she was anxious for you to have this pleasure."

I knew that myself. Aunt Joan was always very nice and kind in that way. She wanted me to see a little more of the world, and enjoy the pleasures of other girls in moderation. I sometimes thought that she must herself be rather bored by taking me out, as she had done during the autumn; but she never showed the least trace of it if she was. Aunt Joan was one of the most unselfish people in the world, I think.

Mother wrote to her that day explaining things, and

Digitized by Google

we got the answer by return of post. I ran up to mother's room in some excitement to know the result. Mother's face showed me it was all right.

"Yes, dear, she will come. She cannot be here till the afternoon of the twenty-third; but she will make a great effort, and get through in time to be here to take you. That is very kind of her, and I am quite relieved; for I should not like you to be disappointed of your ball."

I skipped round the room in great spirits. My dress had come the evening before, and it was lovely. Mother's taste was always perfect, and Madame knew exactly how to please her. I had put it on yesterday evening to show mother the effect, and I had felt so exceedingly elegant that I should have been more than ever disappointed had things gone contrary.

But now I was quite happy. When Aunt Joan said a thing, she meant it. She never broke her word, or disappointed any who trusted in her. I was radiant with delight; and that very afternoon Roy and I took the boat over to Pinetree Creek, and made an inroad upon Sister.

We told her all the news—for we had not been able to get over often lately. I described my dress, and my delight at the prospect of the ball; and Sister smiled and sympathized and entered into all my happy anticipations. She knew it was the regimental ball, but we did not dwell on that part of the matter. I think Roy

Digitized by Google

had almost forgotten his first idea about soldiers and officers being a painful subject. Of course Sister's story had explained all that, and I just took care that not much should be said about this part of it, and that the name of Clarence should not be mentioned.

Wuppy sat on my knee, and made a certain amount of fuss with me, affording us another topic of conversation and entertainment, but he never wanted to leave Sister and return with us. Perhaps he was a little jealous of Chips, and preferred to be the only house-dog; perhaps Sister had fascinated him completely; anyhow he had given his allegiance to her altogether, and though she called him a visitor, and my dog, I regarded him now as her property entirely.

She was very fond of him, and I think his presence cheered her up in her hours of loneliness. Ross was rather big for the house, although he came into the hall, and established himself after dark upon the rug by the stove which always burned there. But Wuppy was always with Sister, and his pretty appealing little ways had quite won her heart. She had amused herself by teaching him many tricks, and he was now an accomplished member of society.

When we rose to go, I looked up into Sister's face and said with a little appealing air,—

"You have never been to see us yet. Are you never, never going to come?"

Sister took my face between her hands and kissed

Digitized by Google

me in her own sweet way. Her eyes smiled, but yet I saw that little look of shrinking in them.

"Some day," she answered, in the old accustomed formula—"some day, little one, some day."

"You always say 'some day,' I answered, holding her fast; "but I think 'some day' means no day with you. Why should it not be to-day?"

"Ah no, little girl! it will be dark so soon."

"You don't mind the dark; you come across quite as late to the hospital people."

"But it is cold to-day—such a biting wind!" and Sister drew herself together with a little shiver.

I knew that she felt the cold—that her chest was not strong. I could not urge her to run any risk.

"But you will come some day!" I said insistently. "Mother asks so often if you are never coming to see her!"

"Yes, I will come some day," answered Sister—"some day, when you are quite, quite alone. Now run away with you, little girl, or you will be benighted on the water."

So we went, and Sister came down the garden with us, Wuppy and Chips following us and playing the whole way.

It had long been our desire to get Sister across to see our home and our mother, but we had not accomplished it yet. Mother had sent a general invitation, and Sister had answered by a message of thanks and a promise to come "some day." But hitherto we had not

Digitized by Google

succeeded in carrying her off. I suppose the effort to people who go out so little is more than we can understand.

To-day would have been an excellent opportunity, for we were quite alone, and the Lavenders were away. Lady Lavender had carried off her daughters to a friend's house in the neighbourhood, almost immediately after the episode of Mr. Hawke's proposal to Hilda. Perhaps she thought change of scene and society would be good for her daughters. Certainly she had selected a big house, where something was always going on every day, and where there would be little enough time for thought or brooding.

Hilda had hated the idea; but Lady Lavender ruled her daughters with a rod of iron. There they were, and there they would stay till just the eve of Christmas, when they would return to Eagle's Crag, and be joined there by Nigel and Mr. Clarence, to make up a family party.

I should have liked to get Sister to promise to come and see us during this interval, but we could not extract anything definite from her. Communication between the opposite sides of the harbour was so uncertain in this weather that plans were not easily made. Some days we could get across quite easily; then, again, a week might go by, and there was no chance of anything but a most tedious and laborious journey over the ferry; and there were times when even that method of transit was suspended for days together.

Digitized by Google

"If she would only have spent Christmas with us!" I said to Roy as we pushed off and saw her wave her hand to us before she turned back towards the house. "It seems so desolate spending Christmas all alone in such a lonely place; but I'm afraid it would be no good even asking!"

And Roy shook his head and thought the same.

The day of the dance arrived, and I was in great spirits. The gardener was robbing his houses recklessly to make me a choice and appropriate bouquet, and to furnish sprays for my new frock. Aunt Joan was to arrive in the afternoon, and we had everything arranged so that she might be as comfortable as possible, and have time for a real rest before the evening came.

Roy and I were in high feather, practising the new waltz steps, and speculating who would be there and what it would be like. Roy was quite well and strong now, and could walk and ride and dance without any trouble or fatigue, so long as he did not overdo things.

"There will be heaps of men to-night—more men than girls, I expect," he said. "I can take it easy and watch proceedings. But you must keep one dance for me, Cissy; we go so well together."

"Of course I will," I answered, and took another turn round the hall. Then we heard the crunch of gravel beneath the feet of a horse. The door-bell pealed, and a telegram was handed in, at which I looked with a sort of instinctive aversion.

Digitized by Google

We were some miles from a telegraph-station, and all such messages had to be brought by mounted messengers, and generally, owing to the state of the roads, there was considerable delay in the transit. This had probably been some hours on its way. I ran up to mother with it in some dismay. Surely, surely it could not be from Aunt Joan to say she could not come! Aunt Joan never, never disappointed people who trusted in her!

Mother opened it, and I saw her face fall.

"Cissy dear, I'm afraid this will be a great disappointment to you!"

I gave a great gulp, but tried to be brave.

"Can't Aunt Joan come?"

"No; there has been a fall of sand and stones in one of the tunnels. No trains can get through. They are working double shifts, but the line cannot possibly be cleared before night—perhaps not before to-morrow; and then it must be shored up to make it safe for trains to pass. Aunt Joan cannot possibly get here before to-morrow;" and mother handed me the paper, her face full of sympathy.

It was long for a telegram. Aunt Joan evidently wanted to explain the situation clearly. I tried to keep back the tears which rose to my eyes as I realized how absolutely impossible it was for her to arrive.

"But just suppose it had happened as her train passed through," said mother, with a little shiver. "How should we be feeling if we had persuaded her to

Digitized by Google

come a day earlier, and her train had been buried in this fall?"

"Oh, that would have been terrible!" I cried, really able for a moment to feel that we had much to be thankful for. And yet the disappointment was very keen and deep. I had not often set my heart upon anything as much as I had set it upon this ball.

Roy was reading the telegram now, exclaiming with sorrow and dismay.

He was full of boyish expedients.

"Can't I chaperon Cissy, mother? I'll get myself up in a false beard and play the old buffer beautifully."

"My dear boy!"

"Well, but mother, Garth and I together could take care of her. Don't girls ever go to dances with their brothers?"

"Not that I ever heard of," answered mother, gently but firmly. "At any rate, Cissy must not do so. I am more sorry than I can say; but she cannot go without a proper chaperon. She would not enjoy herself in the least if she did."

"But Lady Lavender—"

"We do not know for certain that Lady Lavender will be there," answered mother, "though we think it probable."

"Couldn't we wire and ask—"

But here I interposed quickly.

"I'm not going with Lady Lavender, Roy; I'd rather

Digitized by Google

stay at home altogether," and then, rather afraid lest I should disgrace myself by tears, I ran hastily out of the room, and left Roy and mother to talk it out together.

Talking would do no manner of good, I knew. There was nobody in the place besides ourselves going. Gentry were almost a minus quantity in Fair Haven, and already the dusk was beginning to fall. No, there was no time to do anything. It was a terrible disappointment. But other people had been disappointed before this, and I supposed I should get over it somehow.

I went to my room, where the fire had been already lighted, and where my pretty dress lay outspread upon the bed. I looked at it with a sigh, and paced up and down the room. I tried to think how much more terrible it would have been if Aunt Joan had been hurt in the landslip. I could be very thankful that it had taken place before she got near. But apart from that I had no very satisfactory thoughts. It seemed rather hard, when I had so few chances of seeing a gay spectacle, that I should be defrauded of this one.

I began to wonder why I did not hear Roy's voice calling to me. I had been quite an hour alone since leaving mother's room. The dusk had fallen within doors, and the dancing flames lighted up the white folds and silvery sheen of my dress, till it sparkled and quivered.

Digitized by Google

"I had better call Mary and have it put away, or Janet will be taking a fancy to try it on," I remarked as I prepared to leave the room. "Oh, dear, dear! why does everything go wrong just at the last? If Aunt Joan had not thought she could get away, perhaps we should have thought of somebody else. But now there is no time to do anything."

"Cissy!—Cissy!—Ciss!" cried Roy's voice, echoing up the staircase. I wondered why it sounded so full of triumph and excitement. Surely nothing could have happened in this little while! Yet I ran downstairs with a sort of vague hope springing up in my heart.

"Come along!" he cried, as he heard my steps upon the stairs. "Come and see whom I've got here!"

Could it be Aunt Joan, I asked myself as I hastened down. Could she possibly have got through, or come by some other route? There was no other route, as I well knew; but why then was Roy so excited?

"Come along and look at your chaperon!" he cried, dancing about in front of the drawing-room door. He flung it open as I came forward. The room was illuminated by a great dancing fire of logs, and in front of it, upon the rug, with her fur cloak flung back from her shoulders and a little flush upon her cheeks, stood—

"Sister!" I cried, with astonishment and rapture in my voice, made a dash at her, and hugged her like a bear.

Digitized by Google

"I've got her! She's our lawful prey!" cried Roy. "I said I'd get you a chaperon—or perish in the attempt! I asked mother if I might ask Sister; and when she said yes, I got the boat and just tore across the water. I laid the case before Sister, and she just acted like a first-class trump! She's going to take you to the ball to-night, Cissy! There! what do you say to me for the right sort of brother?"

Roy was beside himself with delight at his achievement; but I could hardly believe eyes or ears.

"It can't be true!" I cried, looking from one to the other. "Sister, you shall not be bullied into doing anything you do not like! I would rather stay at home than that you should go if you hate it."

But Sister was one of those people who, when their minds are made up, never falter or turn back. How Roy had won her consent to stand by us in this emergency I could not imagine; but Sister had come with the intention of being my chaperon at the ball, if mother approved. Mother had approved, and now it was settled. Garth had sent a card to Miss Lucas, as a mark of attention he deemed fitting to one of our friends; but the idea of going had certainly never entered her head, until Roy had come over a little while ago with his pitiful tale of my disappointment.

I danced away to see that the room prepared for Aunt Joan should be lighted up for Miss Lucas. I found the fire blazing away, and warmth and light

Digitized by Google

everywhere. A little valise had been brought up, which I suppose contained Sister's belongings. Of course she would have to stay the night with us. There could be no going to and fro over the water by dark. Oh, what a thing it would be to face Lady Lavender at the ball, under the escort of Sister! I was perfectly certain that Sister would be the belle of the room, let people say what they liked. I could hardly believe I was not dreaming. Everything was so wonderful and delightful. Roy had taken Sister to introduce her to mother. He came tearing up to find me, two steps at a time.

"They have just fallen in love with each other! They are getting on like a house on fire. Mother is as delighted with Sister as we could wish. I say, Cissy, haven't I been and gone and done it this time?"

I hugged Roy. I was in wild spirits. Suddenly I stopped short, and asked,—

"Roy, will Mr. Clarence be there?"

"No," answered Roy, staring—"not that I know of. He doesn't come down before to-morrow. He's in London. Why?"

"Oh, I'll tell you some other time. I've got a sort of idea about him. I shouldn't have liked him to see Sister—that's all. But it may be only my fancy."

"I think he's safe not to be there. He hasn't affected the regiment's society much, even when he was down here. The colonel will be there, of course."

Digitized by Google

"Yes, that's nothing. It's Mr. Clarence I was thinking about. Never mind, Roy; I'll tell you afterwards. Let's go down and have tea in mother's room. I'm so glad she and Sister like each other; but then they could not help it!"

They certainly did like each other; there could be no question as to that. Sister was quite herself, neither shy nor shrinking with mother. She was telling her all about Roy's accident and the injury when we came in, in a way mother had never heard it told before; and then they talked of lots of things, and I was almost surprised to find how much Sister knew of what went on, seeing how shut up was the life she led.

Then when we had had a nice sociable little tea, I took Sister up to her room, and she let me put her into a comfortable chair, and pet her and make much of her; and when we had had a nice cosy talk, we agreed to dress, and then to have a nice time before dinner, after which it would be time for the carriage to take us to Watchet Bay. We kept early hours in this part of the world, and the dancing would really begin at nine o'clock.

Sister would not let me talk about her goodness in coming. She would not let me ask her if she "minded," or if it were very hard for her. She was going to take me, and there was an end of it. I found to-day, as I had found on occasion before, that, in spite of Sister's gentleness and sweetness, she could be firm as a rock

Digitized by Google

sometimes, and that in a battle of wills I always came off second best.

Sister consented to have Mary in to help her with her hair and dress; for, as she said, the latter would be certainly very old-fashioned, as she had not been to a party she did not know when.

"Your chaperon will be a sad guy, little girl; but then nobody looks at the chaperons, so it does not much matter."

I stopped her by a great hug.

"I don't believe that anybody will be half as lovely as my chaperon!" I said, with a ring of triumph in my voice; and then I ran off to my room, where for a considerable time I was engrossed by the mysteries of my toilet.

When all was done I went to show myself to mother, who examined me with critical but approving eyes, and after making one or two trifling alterations to suit her taste, I was pronounced "fit to be seen," and hurried laughingly away to see how it fared with Sister.

"Come in!" said her clear voice, in response to my knock; and I entered and stood a moment in the doorway, exclaiming beneath my breath,—

"O Sister!"

I could scarcely believe my eyes at the vision I beheld. I don't know what I had expected, but I had never before seen Sister in anything but black. This sheeny figure in flowing white startled me almost as

Digitized by Google

though it had been a ghost; and Mary's honest face, beaming with satisfaction and pleasure, showed me that she entered fully into the situation.

I took it all in in a moment. This was Sister's wedding-dress! Did she not tell me she had had it made? She would never, perhaps, have parted with it, and she was wearing it to-night for my sake. It had been made years and years ago, and yet the cycle of fashions come round so regularly that it did not look strange to-day. Those statuesque folds would suit any period, and Sister's beautiful figure required no embellishment from the milliner's art. The sleeves were small according to present fashion, but Mary had been equal to the occasion. She had dressed Sister's beautiful and abundant golden hair in a most artistic fashion, and had crowned it with folds of filmy lace —the wedding-veil, of course. The veil was fastened with sprays of delicate fern and hot-house blossom, and was then lightly draped across the shoulders, just taking off the look of plainness which stamped the dress as being of a bygone day, and giving a touch of picturesqueness to the whole costume which was delightful to the eye.

There was a little flush on Sister's cheek. I could well understand what had brought it there. I felt a stab of pain go through my own heart as I realized what she must have felt as she donned this snowy finery. I almost wished that Roy had not asked this

Digitized by Google

thing of her, and yet—and yet— Oh, how lovely she did look! I could not but triumph in the thought of the sensation her appearance must create.

"Well, little girl," said Sister, in quite a natural voice, "is that the pretty new frock I have heard of? I think it will be the prettiest there to-night."

"No, it won't," I answered boldly. "There is one prettier still to my certain knowledge." And Sister, reading my thoughts in my eyes, smiled, and put her hand on my shoulder.

"Silly child! And all the credit there is is due to Mary. She has made me so fine I hardly know myself."

She gave one of her kind looks towards the maid, who smiled and courtesied, and said that there were ladies whom it was a pleasure to dress. Sister was making captives of all our household, I could see. We went downstairs together and showed ourselves to mother on the way.

I could see that mother was startled by Sister's beauty, although I had often spoken of it. In the dusk before tea she had not seen her very clearly. Now that the light was full on, and she saw her in all this shining white drapery, it was no wonder she was struck and astonished.

"Did you ever see anything so lovely?" I asked of Roy, who joined us; and he made a pantomimic gesture behind Sister's back, whispering,—

Digitized by Google

"She's a regular stunner!"

We dined together, Sister and Roy and I, and it seemed more like a dream than a real dinner. I could scarcely take my eyes from Sister's face, and sometimes when she caught my glance she would smile, and her colour would fly up a little as she said,—

"Well, little girl?"

I did not know how to answer. I could not be always telling her how beautiful she was, but that was the thought in my mind, and I think she knew it.

The carriage was announced as we sat over our dessert, and very soon we were driving along the half-frozen roads. It was a still night, and the stars twinkled a little frostily in the sky, but there was no wind, and we kept snug and warm under our furs. I slipped my hand into Sister's, and felt her fingers close over it. I was excited and I was happy. I felt as though something unwonted was somehow in store for me, though I little guessed what it would be.

As we drove into the town we got into quite a tail of carriages, all going in one direction; and by the time we drew up at the door of the town-hall, we found quite a crowd assembled outside to see the people filing in. The place was so transformed I hardly knew it—banks of flowers everywhere, and the sound of the scraping of violins from the musicians not far away.

The rooms were a blaze of light as we entered. I saw several familiar faces, amongst both officers and

Digitized by Google

guests, as we made our appearance, but for the moment I saw neither Garth nor Colonel Clarence.

We were received with some *empressement.* I was certain that people all over the room were asking who was my unknown companion. I felt a thrill of pride and pleasure as I walked beside her up the long dancing-hall. Then several young men came up. I was furnished with a card. I began to dispense dances.

My first ball had begun!

Digitized by Google

CHAPTER XIV.

SOMETHING STARTLING.

A FEW minutes later Garth came hurrying up the long room to greet me.

"You are here, Cissy? I was afraid perhaps we should not get you. The fall in the tunnel—Aunt Joan; how have you managed? Are you with Lady Lavender?"

Sister was standing close to me; but I don't think it ever entered Garth's mind that she could be my chaperon. She looked so young and beautiful herself. I was certain I caught a sidelong glance of admiration and curiosity shot at her from his eyes as he stood beside me. My heart swelled with a sort of delighted pride. Sister was making a sensation, though I am certain she had not the least idea of it.

"Aunt Joan could not get through to-day. You are quite right there. She telegraphed, and I thought it was all over with me for to-night. But Roy went across to Miss Lucas, and she very, very kindly promised to take me. Garth, I want to introduce you to

Digitized by Google

Miss Lucas;" and putting out a hand and touching Sister's arm, I added, "This is my brother Garth."

Garth bowed rather low, and then took the hand Sister extended. Her smile was free and sweet. She knew one of my brothers so well that this one could not seem quite a stranger. They talked for a few minutes, and other people came up. Amongst them was Dr. Barton, who greeted Sister with an *empressement* that had its effect upon those who stood by; for Dr. Barton was not in the main a lady's man, and though he always appeared at local functions, he had the reputation of having a rather sharp tongue, which many ladies rather feared. As a rule, he seemed to avoid their society, save in his professional capacity; but here he was singling out Sister for his especial notice, and expressing himself as delighted to meet her again and see her abroad in the world.

I thought of the words Sister had said to me when I had first expressed my fears lest the evening should be a great tax upon her,—

"I shall know nobody, dear, and nobody will know me. I shall just sit in some quiet corner and watch you. I shall like to see you enjoying yourself; and nobody will notice me. Sometimes I think one is never quite so much alone as in a crowd."

But Sister's anticipations did not seem likely to be verified.

I left her for a few minutes talking with Dr. Barton,

Digitized by Google

and went off with Garth to greet various friends and acquaintances. He spoke at once, rather quickly and eagerly,—

"Cissy, why did you never tell me what a beautiful woman Miss Lucas was? She is splendid!"

"I did tell you, and you only laughed."

"Did I?"

"Yes, and said it was quite refreshing to see such an enthusiasm about an old maid! Don't you remember?" and I laughed mischievously, for I liked to get the better of Garth sometimes.

"I believe I did," he answered good-naturedly; "but I sent her an *invite*, all the same. Who is she, Cissy? She looks like a queen. It isn't only her beauty, but her manner, her air—everything. Will she dance, do you think? Half the fellows in the room want to know that."

"I'm sure she won't," I answered quickly; "and, Garth, you mustn't let her be bothered. I'm just amazed at her goodness in coming here at all. She hasn't been anywhere for years. I should never have dreamed of such a thing myself. I can't think how Roy could have been so bold. She wants to sit quietly in some corner and look on. Don't go introducing everybody to her; I'm sure it would be an awful infliction."

"Well, if you say so. I suppose we fellows are very poor company for a glorious creature like that. But it's rather hard lines, too. And she looks as though she

Digitized by Google

had lived in drawing-rooms all her life; she has such a presence. Look at her with Dr. Barton and the general! There's nothing of the nun or novice in her manner, is there?"

I looked back, and felt that thrill of admiration run through me which I so often experienced in watching Sister. There was such a perfect dignity and simplicity about her. It must have been inborn; I don't believe it could have been acquired, although it had doubtless been developed by the life she had led and the posts of responsibility and command that she had held.

"I have not seen Colonel Clarence," I remarked as we went on our way.

"No—so tiresome—some illness amongst the men. Clarence had to see about it. It's the sort of thing he will do himself. I daresay it's nothing; but there was a bit of a scare. He had to wait to see another doctor they had telegraphed for, and get his opinion. But he will be here later on, unless anything unforeseen arises."

At that moment I saw Lady Lavender and her party sweep in. They had come in a large contingent from the house where they were stopping. I did not see Hilda, but Amy was there, under her mother's wing. I got Garth to move forward a little, that I might catch Amy's eye.

She came close to me, and I found opportunity to put a question which was burning upon my lips.

Digitized by Google

"Amy, will Mr. Clarence be here?"

She shook her head.

"No; isn't it tiresome—I mean having the ball earlier than was fixed? He is in London, and can't get back till to-morrow. He is coming to us then; but he won't be here to-night."

I felt immediately as though a load had rolled from my heart. I had been afraid all the while lest Amy should have sent a message that would have brought her lover here in time for this function. I was terribly afraid of a meeting between him and Sister. I was not certain that I should not have had to feign a headache and go home. But now it was all right. He was not coming. There was nothing more to fear. I could enjoy myself to my heart's content.

Lady Lavender was greeting me now with her customary bland affection.

"Your aunt is with you, I suppose, my dear? I have not seen her; but she will not be far off," and Lady Lavender swept the room with her long-handled glasses.

"Oh no; Aunt Joan could not get here. There has been a landslip in one of the tunnels. The line cannot be cleared before to-morrow. I was afraid I should not be able to come; but mother asked Miss Lucas to take me, and she kindly consented."

I spoke quite easily and naturally, and I hope I did not betray the little thrill of malice which I felt.

Digitized by Google

I was quite conscious of the slight stiffening of manner which was immediately perceptible as Lady Lavender remarked,—

"Indeed! I was not aware that Miss Lucas was in society." And I felt a quiver run through me of mingled indignation and joy.

The next minute the triumph completely overpowered every other feeling as Lady Lavender, still with her glasses to her eyes, looked up the room and fixed them, saying,—

"Who is that very striking and beautiful woman talking with Dr. Barton and General Henderson? I do not remember ever to have seen her before; and it is certainly not a face to forget."

"The lady in white—with golden hair?" queried Amy, peeping through the various intervening groups. "Yes, who can she be? How very beautiful she is! She looks like a princess; and what a lovely dress she has, and how picturesque all that lace is! She looks like a picture. Is she a girl, or is she a chaperon? I can't make out. Cissy, why do you look like that? Do you know her?"

"That is Miss Lucas," I answered quietly, and turned away without waiting to see the effect of my words. I felt avenged at that moment for all the slights the Lavenders had offered to Sister.

"You scored that time, Cissy," said a quiet voice at my elbow, and I found myself shaking hands with

Digitized by Google

Nigel. "You have done the unattainable at last—brought Miss Lucas out of her shell. Do you think I could accomplish a second miracle, and obtain a dance from her?"

"I don't think you could," I answered, for once gracious to Nigel in the plenitude of my triumph; "but you can come and ask."

The dancing was about to commence. I wanted to return to my chaperon, and Nigel gave me his arm across the room to Sister's side. She received him with her gentle dignity of manner; and I could see Lady Lavender's glasses focussed upon us as Nigel stood talking very earnestly to her. Finally he led her to a seat in a secluded corner, rather embowered in greenery, where there was a comfortable divan capable of holding two persons; and when my partner had carried me off, he took the seat beside her, and talked long and seriously all through the opening dance, without a thought of joining himself.

I found them earnestly discussing many knotty problems when I returned, Nigel making notes of many little bits of information which Sister was able to give him.

"It's rather too bad to 'talk shop' at a ball, isn't it, Cissy?" he asked as he gave up his seat to me; "but Miss Lucas is such a *rara avis* that one must make the most of the opportunity of getting a talk with her.—Miss Lucas, I think you ought to be prosecuted for

Digitized by Google

hiding your light under a bushel as you do. I never gain as much real practical information from anybody else; and yet you keep it locked up all to yourself unless one can catch you at rare intervals and drag it out!"

"Anybody is very welcome to the result of my experiences," answered Sister, with her quick, fascinating smile. "But you will soon reach the limit of my experiences, Lord Lavender; they are not so very boundless."

Nigel danced the next dance with me, and spoke of Sister in a manner which made us fast friends—for the moment at any rate. His admiration for her was so sincere that for a time my old idea revived of seeing him pay court to Sister, and of her ruling supreme at Eagle's Crag. He asked quite earnestly whether I thought she would remain at The Hermitage, whether she would lay aside her habits of seclusion, and be more accessible to the world. I answered a little incisively that it was partly the world's own fault she remained so secluded. She did desire quiet and solitude; but there had been no attempt on the part of her neighbours to induce her to reconsider her decision. Nigel knew what I meant, and dropped the subject. But he returned to Sister's side many times during the evening; and I noted with a sensation of triumph that people remarked Lord Lavender's attentions, and that Sister was having (quite unconsciously) a small triumph on her own account. Not many people knew her, and

Digitized by Google

she did not desire wholesale introductions; but a few of the leading lights of the neighbourhood asked and obtained introduction to her, and expressed their intention of calling, if they might be permitted that privilege. They had not known that The Hermitage had been occupied all these months.

Once during the evening I overheard Lady Lavender say to her son,—

"Well, Nigel, I don't like it. I think people are foolish; but if it is to be, you can introduce me to Miss Lucas."

I had never liked Nigel quite so well as I did when I heard his reply,—

"Excuse me, mother; I think that will hardly do. You have the remedy in your own hands. If you desire to make the acquaintance of Miss Lucas, it would be better to obtain it in the ordinary way."

After that I knew that, sooner or later, Lady Lavender would call at The Hermitage. She might say what she would, but Nigel was the apple of her eye. If he had shown the world his liking and respect for Miss Lucas —and this he most certainly did—his mother would be certain to follow his lead. She was too good a mother, and too astute a woman of the world, to let it be said that she would not call upon one whom her son counted as a friend.

I was enjoying my dance very much, the more so that Sister seemed to enjoy herself too in her quiet

Digitized by Google

corner. She had been very well placed indeed. When I was away from her, she nearly always had somebody to talk to—either Nigel or Dr. Barton, Garth or Roy or General Henderson. Now and again she was alone, but not often; and yet she was secluded where she sat, and did not feel bewildered by the crowd. She said many times that it was a very pretty sight, and she was not tired, although I was afraid as the evening went on that her head was beginning to ache. Sister did suffer from bad headaches, and it was quite probable that the lights and music and excitement might bring one on.

I hardly knew whether I was glad or sorry that Colonel Clarence was so long in appearing. I liked him very much, and should have welcomed him on my own account; but then I had a slight uneasy feeling lest he, too, might in one way or another be connected with Sister's past life. I knew that he and Mr. Clarence had been brought up almost like brothers, and Mr. Clarence certainly knew something about Sister. Of course that might not be any reason why the colonel should. He had been many years away from the country. Whatever had happened might have happened when he was far enough off. All the same, of that I could not be sure, and therefore, though I was sorry in one way for the absence of Garth's friend, I was glad in another.

Supper-time came, and we went to the rather sump-

Digitized by Google

tuous banquet provided in our honour. Dr. Barton took Sister in, and Nigel, who had come to us almost simultaneously, had to content himself with me; for which I was rather sorry, as I felt certain he had come for Sister. I thought I would be nice to him, to make up for his disappointment. Moreover, I wanted to talk to him on my own account; and when we were seated at the table, I asked almost at once,—

"Why did not Hilda come?"

"She does not much care for these things," answered Nigel; "and Hilda has been rather seedy lately."

"You have seen her, then?"

"Only just. I couldn't get to the Grenvilles' earlier than this afternoon. I had meant to go a few days before; but things kept turning up, and I couldn't get away."

"Then you haven't had any talk with her yet? Did you say she was not well?"

"Not very flourishing; but I don't think it's anything much. She will be herself again when we get back home. She does not care for the perpetual round of pleasure-making that goes on at The Towers. I know how she feels. It bores me to extinction after a bit. And now with every man and woman among them talking nothing but bicycle from morning till night, it's a perfect penance to be there! I'm really thankful that mother has never let the girls ride the

Digitized by Google

bicycle. When I see the way some fellows' sisters go on, I'm thankful for my own."

We talked a little about The Towers and the guests there, and then as Nigel had not led up to the desired subject, I said,—

"You have heard about Mr. Hawke's professorship, I suppose?"

"Yes," he answered at once; "I am exceedingly glad about it. He well deserves it; and it will give him prestige and a wider field of influence, as well as the addition to his income. He will have more time, too, for his writings, which are becoming more and more sought after. They could not have found a better man; and he will be a great power for good."

I looked at Nigel whilst he was speaking, to try to read whether he knew what had happened; but he gave no sign. That was the provoking part about Nigel. He could be so inscrutable and obscure if he chose.

I made another shot, to see if that would tell.

"Is he coming to Eagle's Crag for any part of the Christmas vacation? Roy said he thought you had asked him."

"So I had. But it was not quite settled. It is not quite settled yet. This may in some ways change his plans. But I hope he will still come. I shall try to get him if I can."

No, I could not tell whether he knew or not. He

Digitized by Google

answered with perfect frankness, but gave no sign. Either he did not yet know, or he was not going to betray knowledge; but I could not tell which.

Supper was rather a long business, but it was very amusing, and I did not mind. Still when we rose to return to the dancing-room, I saw that Sister was looking rather white and tired.

I pressed up to her side, and asked if she would not rather go home. I would get the carriage brought directly if she would; but she smiled and shook her head.

"Oh no; we will wait a little longer. It is only the heat and the lights and all that buzz of talking. I am not quite used to it, you see. But the ball-room will be nice and cool again now."

"Oh, but see here! Here is a dear little alcove full of flowers, and nobody seems to care about it. You shall rest in here, Sister; and my partners can find me or not, as they like. I don't care if they don't come. We can have a cosy time here, and listen to the music and watch the people going up and down. Sit down and make yourself comfortable. There, that is nice. It is much pleasanter here than in all that glare."

Our little retreat was not far from the ball-room, and as Roy and Garth knew where I was, my partners soon found me out. I went to and fro, and Sister sat in the cool greenness, and said she was enjoying herself very much, and I came back to her between dances.

Garth had asked me, quite early in the evening,

Digitized by Google

to keep one late dance for Colonel Clarence, in case he might come, and I had done so. Garth knew which it was, but I did not much expect him to claim it. I had not caught sight of him all the evening, although I had not quite the same opportunities now that I was farther off from the people during the promenade between the different numbers.

"I don't think I shall be dancing this next," I said as I returned to Sister, and dismissed Roy, who had been my partner, to get us some ices; "I don't think he has come yet. But I shall quite like having a rest and an ice with you here."

We enjoyed our ices, and were standing looking at the flowers, some of which were very beautiful, when there was a quick, firm tread behind us, and a familiar voice said,—

"I hear you are good enough to have kept this dance for me, Miss Wyverne. May I have—"

We had both turned round quickly at the sound of Colonel Clarence's voice. Now that voice suddenly stopped in the middle of the sentence. I looked up. There was Colonel Clarence before me in irreproachable evening dress, but his face had suddenly turned as white as his shirt. I think he looked like a man who had suddenly been shot through the heart, yet does not know it, has not had time to fall.

I was startled and frightened. I had forgotten for the moment my former fears respecting Colonel Clarence

Digitized by Google

"'May I have'—Colonel Clarence's voice suddenly stopped in the middle of the sentence."

Page 292.

Digitized by Google

Digitized by Google

and Sister. Now I turned to her in a frightened way, just as I should instinctively have done had Roy been taken ill.

But when I looked at Sister, her face was as white as the colonel's, and in her eyes was a strained, almost terrified expression, like nothing I had ever seen there. I sprang towards her in a fright.

"Sister—Sister!" I cried.

She put her hands upon my shoulder; she made a great effort to command herself—and she succeeded.

"Go, dear," she said—"go with Colonel Clarence. Little girl, you must. I wish it."

When Sister spoke in that tone, even though it might be little more than a whisper, there was nothing for it but to obey.

Colonel Clarence had come one pace nearer, and now he finished his interrupted sentence,—

"May I have the pleasure?"

I should not have known the voice; but the arm to which I clung, trembling and bewildered, was as firm as a rock. The colonel made no attempt to speak, but when I looked at his face, it wore the strangest expression, as though it had been carved in marble.

We danced in almost perfect silence. Perhaps there was nothing very remarkable in that. Good dancers seldom talk much, and the colonel was an excellent dancer. My heart was beating fast and furiously; my head was in a whirl. I had been prepared for a mutual

Digitized by Google

recognition between Mr. Clarence and Sister; but I had not felt any great expectation of it between her and his cousin. And yet the emotion betrayed by two such calm and self-controlled persons could not be accounted for without some grave cause.

What could it mean? what could it mean? I felt like one on the edge of a mystery.

Had not Sister been jilted long years ago by an officer in the army? And was not Colonel Clarence just about the right age to be a suitor for Sister's hand in the days of his early manhood?

But then Garth had told me that Colonel Clarence had himself been heartlessly jilted by a woman! Oh, what could it mean? what could it mean?

Could it have been some dreadful misunderstanding which had parted them all these years? I had read of such things. I knew that they happened in real life too. I tried to steady my pulses and think, as we moved round and round to the rhythmic strains of the band.

Colonel Clarence spoke once rather suddenly.

"Who is that lady you were with, Miss Wyverne?"

"It is Miss Lucas of The Hermitage," I answered. For it was useless making a mystery of it now. Anybody in the room could tell him that much.

"*Miss* Lucas, did you say?" he asked, with a slight emphasis on the first word. "She is not a married lady, then?"

Digitized by Google

A quick tingling thrill ran through me at the question, I hardly knew why.

"Oh no, she is not married;" and then, after a pause, I ventured to ask,—

"Do you know her?"

"I—I—had some acquaintance with her—once."

"Before you went abroad, I suppose?" I said, speaking as naturally as I could; "for she has been nursing in hospitals for a great many years, since—I mean till her health broke down."

"Nursing in hospitals," he said, speaking the words slowly; "the fashionable craze."

"You would not say that if you saw her with sick people. It is not fashion with her."

I dared then for the first time to look into his face. It still wore that strange drawn expression I had noted before, and was white and hard as marble. But his eyes had changed in their outlook; they were full of sadness, and the steely hardness had gone. But he said no more, and I could not continue without encouragement. We finished our dance in silence, and afterwards I said,—

"I want to speak to Roy. He is over there. Please take me to him."

The colonel obeyed, left me with Roy, bowed, spoke the conventional words of thanks, and walked off. He must have gone straight out of the room, for almost immediately Garth came up, looking surprised and vexed.

Digitized by Google

"What have you done to the colonel, Cissy? He is going to his quarters looking like a dazed man, as white as a ghost! He was all right just now. What can be the matter?"

"I don't know," I answered, with more or less of truth; then I turned to Roy and said,—

"Sister has a bad headache come on. Get the carriage, and we will go home at once. I am quite ready, and we must not make her ill."

Roy was ready too. He was soon tired by heat and bustle.

"All right; I'll get the carriage and your wraps, and come and fetch you in the little alcove when it's here. You wait for me there."

He disappeared in the crowd, and Garth looked at me, and asked curiously,—

"I say, Cissy, is anything up?"

"I don't know," I answered. "Garth, I should like to talk to you, but I can't here. Something strange has happened—"

"Colonel Clarence didn't propose to you, did he?" asked Garth suddenly.

"Oh no, no! it's nothing like that. But perhaps, perhaps— Oh, I can't talk here. But you are coming home to-morrow, Garth? You are going to spend Christmas with us?"

"Yes; I get my long leave now. I'll be home in good time. If anything's the matter, I'll try to help

Digitized by Google

you to straighten it out. You're sure I can do nothing more to-night?"

"No, nothing more. I must go to Sister. Her head is bad. I want to get her away."

Garth took me to the alcove. Sister was sitting there, looking very white, but perfectly calm. Dr. Barton was standing looking at her.

"Well, Miss Wyverne," he said, "I hope you are ready to go now; for if you are not worn out yourself, you have worn out Miss Lucas pretty considerably."

"I have sent for the carriage. It will be here directly.—I am so sorry, Sister."

Miss Lucas smiled. It was not like her usual smile, but I don't suppose Dr. Barton or Garth knew that.

"It is the penalty one pays for keeping regular hours," she answered. "One's head resents liberties taken with it suddenly."

"I shall come and see you to-morrow, Miss Lucas," said Dr. Barton, "whether you like it or not. We can't have the best nurse in the parish on the sick-list herself."

"My own nurses will take care of me—very good care," answered Sister lightly. "You had better reserve your efforts for really sick persons, Dr. Barton. You will find me a case of Mother Hubbard's dog, and have tired your overworked horses for nothing."

I could see that the doctor was concerned at Sister's appearance, and I did not wonder; yet I was certain

Digitized by Google

that it was not physical illness but a mental shock which had left her so deadly white, and given that strange, pinched look to her nostrils.

Roy came up two steps at a time bringing our wraps, and Dr. Barton occupied himself in swathing up Sister, and giving her many injunctions against taking a chill. I think his presence was rather a relief to us all; it seemed to take off the strained tension of the moment.

Sister lay back in the carriage with closed eyes, and Roy dozed opposite, tired with his exertions, and quite unconscious of there being anything amiss.

I was wide-eyed and wakeful, my brain on fire. I was turning over all manner of wild speculations in my mind, seeking to put together the pieces of the puzzle. I wondered if I should ever see light through the tangle, longing unspeakably that things might come right, and that peace and happiness might be restored to Sister's life; yet I was perplexed above measure at the new turn in affairs, not seeing the way a bit through the tangle.

When we got home, Sister refused any sort of refreshment, saying she only wanted to go to her room. I followed her there, and hung about wistfully. She let me take off her white lace draperies, and loosen the masses of her hair. She let me unfasten her dress; and then she turned to me and kissed me again and again.

"You must go to bed yourself now, little girl," she

Digitized by Google

said, "and sleep off all your dissipation. A night's rest will set us all up again. Poor Roy was very tired when we left."

How could she think of Roy or anybody else, I wondered. I clung to her passionately, almost weeping.

"O Sister, Sister, why did we make you go?"

"Why should I not go?" she asked, looking down at me, but still holding me close.

"O Sister, Sister, don't tell me if you don't want; but I couldn't help seeing—noticing—and he said he had known you once—Colonel Clarence—"

Sister held me closely in her arms. I felt a quiver run through her, but her voice was calm and sweet.

"There is no reason why you should not know the truth, dear. Colonel Clarence—when he was Captain Clarence—is the man to whom I was once engaged."

And then she gently put me out of the room and closed the door behind her. I knew I must not go to her again.

Digitized by Google

CHAPTER XV.

CHRISTMAS.

I THOUGHT I should never sleep all night. I turned and tossed, and tossed and turned; and all sorts of thoughts came into my head, till it ached and throbbed with the confusion.

One thing only I felt certain about, and that was that two such people as Sister and Colonel Clarence, both so exceptionally perfect, could never have "jilted" each other. There must have been some mistake, some misunderstanding—one of those strange things that do happen in real life as well as in books, by which lives are spoiled and persons made to suffer so much unhappiness. Could it possibly be that I might help to unravel the mystery, and bring the sunshine back into Sister's life? I thrilled with ecstasy at the bare thought, but was always pulled up by the difficulty of seeing the next step.

There were sounds of stir in the house before I fell asleep at last, to dream all sorts of jumbled dreams. But I must have slept very sound then; for when I

Digitized by Google

awoke the sun had got quite opposite my windows, and I knew it must be nearly twelve o'clock.

Up I jumped in a great hurry and rang the bell. Almost at once Mary appeared smiling, with a cup of tea in her hands.

"Her ladyship would not have you disturbed; she said you were to have your sleep out. And it is so near luncheon-time I thought you would not care for breakfast, so I just brought you a cup of tea and a bit of toast."

But there was more than this on the tray. There was a little three-cornered note lying beside the cup. I saw in a moment that the superscription was in Sister's hand, and I pounced upon it at once.

"Miss Lucas left that for you, miss," explained Mary.

"Left it! why, where is she now?"

"Gone back home, miss. Mr. Royal took her in the boat more than an hour ago. She did not look fit to be out of her bed, that she didn't, as I made bold to tell her. But she smiled, and said she should do better at home. She has her own servants there that understand her. Not but what I'd have been proud and glad to do anything for her myself, for a more sweet-spoken lady I never met, nor a more beautiful one, saving her ladyship. But she wouldn't be persuaded."

A thrill of disappointment and discouragement ran through me. It was like a check to all my eager plans.

"Why wasn't I called?" I asked, almost sharply.

Digitized by Google

"It was her ladyship's orders," answered Mary equably, "and Miss Lucas said just the same. She didn't look fit for no talk or no persuading either. Her face was as white as white. Mr. Royal, he did not like her to go; but when she said she would rather, he went and fetched the boat and put her across without another word. When Miss Lucas says a thing she means it, and she makes you feel it too. She's a wonderful, beautiful lady. Mr. Royal says there was nobody in the room admired so much as she was last night."

Another time I should have been eloquent on the subject, but now I was engrossed by other thoughts. I took the note, opened and read it, hoping I might find some crumb of information and consolation within.

"DARLING,—I am sorry not to see you; but I must go home. I have a troublesome head, and nothing but home quiet will put it right. I should have liked a kiss before going, but it was better for you to sleep. Now, one thing more, little girl. Don't come across to see me for two or three days. I want to be very quiet, and you will be as busy as busy with all your Christmas festivities. Don't be afraid that I shall be pining. I shall be very happy at home in my own way. I just want quiet and nothing else. Don't be vexed at what happened last night. You could not help it. It was not your fault. I did not know he had changed into that regiment. I never thought of such a thing as

Digitized by Google

meeting him. But, after all, it does not matter. So think no more about it, but have a very bright and happy Christmas. That will be the best way of pleasing your most loving, SISTER."

That was all. I was not to rush across to see her. She wanted to be alone with her sorrow and pain. I was to be shut out. And yet the letter was full of tenderness and love. She was not angry. She did not complain. I kissed the paper, and dressed in a sort of fever of impatience and uncertainty.

The worst of it was that I did not know what to do or not to do—whether to speak or not to speak. I was terribly afraid of doing some mischief by an unguarded word; and whom could I take into my confidence without betraying Sister's?

At last I came to the conclusion that for two days I would not speak to anybody or do anything. I would only think and watch, and perhaps some inspiration might come to me. Silence could not hurt anybody; speech might. That was a pretty safe rule, I thought, and having come to a decision thus far, I was rather happier in my mind, and went down to take lunch with Roy without betraying the load at my heart.

He was too full of the ball and the sensation Sister had made to notice my occasional absences of mind. Of course he knew nothing about that meeting, and, just for the moment, I did not wish him to know.

Digitized by Google

There would not be much time for reflection when once I was up and about. It was Christmas Eve. Aunt Joan would be arriving before long. Garth might turn up at any moment; and then I suddenly remembered that Colonel Clarence was to come with him!

That had been settled rather in haste. I had forgotten all about it till this moment. I was not quite certain even now till I had asked Roy; but he answered at once,—

"Yes, he is coming. They were not sure of getting leave together till the other day. But Garth told me last night that it was all right, and the colonel will come over with him to-day. What a bore it was that he missed most of the ball, wasn't it? I think he is so awfully nice. But we shall get to know him better now he stays at the house."

I made some rather incoherent answer, and rushed off to see if everything was ready for Aunt Joan. I did not know how to face the situation of having Colonel Clarence—Sister's wicked lover—here in this house, and he Garth's greatest friend, whom we all liked so much! It was altogether too perplexing and bewildering. I almost wished I had not known it quite so soon. It would make it so difficult having to meet and talk to him.

However, I was too busy to have much time for thinking. There were a dozen little things to be done in the way of getting off Christmas packets and letters.

Digitized by Google

And before all was finished, carriage wheels without announced the arrival of Aunt Joan, and I had to rush out to welcome her, which I did with a hearty good-will.

"You poor child, I hope you got your dance!" was one of the first things she said to me. "I was terribly vexed not to be able to keep my word."

"Oh yes, Aunt Joan. I know you could not help it. It was so kind of you trying to come at all. But it was all right. Roy went across and asked Sister, and she took me."

"Miss Lucas?"

"Yes; wasn't it good of her? I'm afraid it has rather knocked her up. But she came, and she looked lovely."

And there I stopped short, for I found myself on the verge of blurting everything out to Aunt Joan. Somehow it came into my head that she would be a perfectly safe confidante, and would help me better than anybody.

Yet I must think things over before I spoke even to her. I was so terribly afraid of being disloyal to Sister. I must not betray her secret if she wished to hide it—not even to Aunt Joan. I would adhere to my resolution of saying nothing till Christmas had passed. Perhaps by that time some idea would have occurred to me.

Aunt Joan gave me a look which was rather a searching one; but she asked no questions, and I took her up to mother's room and left her there.

Digitized by Google

At dusk there was another bustle of arrival, and Garth walked into the drawing-room with Colonel Clarence at his heels. And I had to give him a friendly welcome.

Tea was brought in, and Garth kicked the Yule-log upon the hearth till it sent forth a blaze of palpitating light which rendered lamps superfluous.

"That's the kind of thing I like," he said—"a nice, cosy, sociable fire. Where is Aunt Joan, Cissy? Having tea upstairs with mother? I suppose she is nursing herself up for the morrow's festivity—mother, I mean? Of course the Lavenders are all coming for the Christmas dinner."

"Oh yes," I answered, "as usual; and mother will dine with us if she possibly can."

"And I hope you have kept Miss Lucas, too," said Garth. "She ought not to be all alone in that hermitage of a place at Christmas-time."

I felt my colour rising, and my heart beginning to beat; but Roy saved me from the trouble of a reply by saying,—

"She would go. We wanted her awfully to stay; but she was rather knocked up by the ball—she goes out so little, you see—and she wanted to get back to her own place and be quiet. It was awfully kind of her coming to take Cissy. I went to her rather as a forlorn hope—it was her or nothing. But when she understood that Cissy would lose the ball if she couldn't

Digitized by Google

get a chaperon, she said she would come. She has been so awfully kind to us always. I'm sure I don't know why."

I could not help stealing a glance at Colonel Clarence as Roy and Garth talked together of Sister—Roy telling a few details of his sojourn under her roof, and her goodness to him. I could see that the colonel was listening, listening, listening, with every sense on the alert. He sat looking straight into the fire, his tea-cup in his hands; but there was something tense in his attitude which struck me a good deal, as did also the expression upon his face.

There was no suspicion of shame there, but a great yearning sadness. I cannot describe the look, but it went to my heart as did some expressions of Sister's, for it seemed to indicate such a load of bravely-borne sorrow and suffering.

I was thankful nobody spoke to me or looked at me, for I was shaking all over, and there were tears in my eyes. In my heart I was saying over and over again,—

"It must have been all some dreadful mistake! They never would have done anything unworthy, either of them. Oh, if I could only find it out! If I could only help to put things straight, how happy I should be!"

It was perfectly impossible not to like Colonel Clarence, he was so gentle and chivalrous, and there was something fascinating in the very gravity and sadness

Digitized by Google

which sometimes betrayed itself in little indescribable ways.

He had a fine voice, and in the evening he sang to us, and I played his accompaniments. Afterwards he talked about music and other things, and finally I saw that he wanted to bring the talk round to Sister and her life at The Hermitage.

It was not easy for me to speak of her to him; but I made the effort, and I do not think he noticed anything unnatural in my manner. He was preoccupied himself, and, of course, he did not know me very well.

I cannot recall that conversation in detail, but I know it made me like him better and better. He spoke so gently and reverently of Sister, and seemed so anxious to know that she was well and happy. I think if I had not known to whom I was talking I should have suspected something; but he candidly acknowledged having known Sister long ago, so he probably thought that would account for his interest in her.

"Shall you go and see her?" I asked, with a beating heart.

I thought he started slightly.

"No," he answered, very gravely. "You see Miss Lucas has retired from the world by her own wish. Unless she showed that she wished to renew acquaintance with it, and with former—acquaintances, I should think it an intrusion to do so."

I said no more. I was anxious not to betray myself.

Digitized by Google

I liked Colonel Clarence increasingly the more I saw of him. How had it all come about? ah! how had it all come about?

Christmas morning! A bright, clear, crisp day, no wind to ruffle the harbour waters, but a dazzling mantle of glittering frost over everything, till the sun's rays melted it.

Christmas was a very bright and happy season at Fair Haven. We knew everybody and everybody knew us. There was nothing but a succession of greetings from high and low from the time we left our gates till we reached the church; and all faces were bright and smiling, for nobody had been forgotten, and I think there was not one desolate heart or foodless table in the whole place that day.

I looked rather wistfully across the harbour as we came out again into the winter sunshine from the church porch. Had it not been for the prohibition, which I felt bound to observe, I should have taken the ferry and gone across to see Sister, as a matter of course; and so would Roy, but he looked at me now and shook his head.

"She said, 'Don't come;' and when Sister says a thing, she means it," he said. "Let's come to the hospital instead, and see how the folks there are doing."

I looked round for Aunt Joan. I thought she would like to come too; but she was already far down the

Digitized by Google

street, making for the harbour. Garth was walking beside her; but presently he turned back and joined us.

"Aunt Joan is just going to take the ferry across, and ask after Miss Lucas," he explained. "She says we are not to wait lunch for her if she should be detained. If she were to see Miss Lucas, she might possibly lunch with her, I daresay."

Roy and I exchanged glances. We had never thought of such a thing as this.

"O Garth, Miss Lucas didn't want anybody to come just yet. She told us so. Can't you run after Aunt Joan and fetch her back? She wouldn't have us go to see her for a few days."

"Well, she needn't see Aunt Joan unless she wants to," answered Garth equably. "Aunt Joan never goes where she is not wanted. But she will be at the ferry by this time. You'd better let her go her own way."

We had no option, it seemed, in the matter, and turned our steps towards the little house, now such a centre of interest and care. It was quite full, Christmas notwithstanding, and all the rooms were gay with holly boughs and flowers. The faces of the inmates were as bright as their surroundings. An appetizing odour of roast beef permeated the place, and every visitor had received gifts of some sort to make the day bright and pleasant.

Nigel and Hilda were there, making the round, and I noted how very bright and glad Hilda's face looked. She gave me a smile as I passed by; but we did not

Digitized by Google

stop to do more than exchange the conventional greetings. We should meet again later on, and enjoy a talk together.

It was an old-established custom that the Lavenders should dine with us on Christmas Day, and that we should go to Eagle's Crag on New-Year's Day. Sometimes the order of the two feasts had been reversed, but latterly it was always at our house that the Christmas dinner took place, as mother was not able to dine out, even at a place so near, and with friends so intimate as those at Eagle's Crag. We could leave her on New-Year's Day evening, but not on Christmas Day. So the Lavenders and any guests they might have always came down to us.

The only guest this year was Amy's affianced husband. I had observed him in church in the morning, and thought he looked aged and careworn. I did not think this look detracted from his appearance; indeed it seemed to me to improve his face, which had before been rather self-confident and self-satisfied. There had been a touch of superciliousness in his manner before which had irritated me somewhat, and which Roy used to imitate to perfection, to our mutual delight; but when he appeared this evening, I observed no trace of it. He was altogether less self-assertive, more quiet, and more courteous in his bearing to every one than he had ever chosen to show himself.

Amy was looking happy and radiant; but I was

Digitized by Google

certain that she was conscious of the change in her lover, and I was not sure that she found it quite as agreeable as the rest of us did. In former days he used rather to behave as though nobody in the company were worth his notice except Amy. Now, though he was as attentive as ever to her, he was more truly polite to others. I happened to be next him at dinner, and he really made himself more agreeable than I fancied he could be. I was not quite sure if Amy liked his talking so much to me; but he did talk a good deal, and in a very different fashion from the old one.

Colonel Clarence sat opposite to us, and I noticed that although he spoke frequently and cordially to his cousin, Mr. Clarence was never quick or ready to respond. He seldom raised his eyes to the face opposite, and did not appear to desire to say more than was needful for politeness.

Once when some allusion was made by somebody at table to old associations and bygone days, I saw a strange sort of spasm pass across Mr. Clarence's face; and when somebody else remarked that Christmas was the season when all misunderstandings and ill-will should be put away, and crooked things made straight, I heard a curious sort of catch of the breath from my neighbour, and I fancied I caught the low murmur,—

"Ah, if they could—if they only could!"

Mother was in her right place to-day at the head of the table, and perhaps for this reason the dinner was not

Digitized by Google

a very long one. We drank the time-honoured toasts as soon as the servants had left, and very soon afterwards we all rose, and Garth gave his arm to lead mother back to her drawing-room couch, before rejoining the gentlemen in the dining-room.

Aunt Joan always took possession of mother when she was with us. So I was free to give myself up to Hilda and Amy. I was rather longing for a chance of speaking alone with Aunt Joan; for to my surprise she had not returned home to lunch, but had lunched at The Hermitage, and had not got back till nearly dusk.

All she had said was that Sister was better of her headache, but was not very well. I noticed that Aunt Joan had been rather grave and preoccupied upon her return, and I had a suspicion that she and Sister had had a confidential talk together; but so far I had asked no questions, nor had Aunt Joan volunteered any information. My curiosity was aroused, but I knew it was not likely to be satisfied that night.

Amy had taken up a place beside the fire, and was evidently watching the door. This was an interval little to her liking, and she did not seem to care to be talked to. Lady Lavender had, of course, joined mother and Aunt Joan. Hilda was standing a little apart, with a soft, dreamy light in her eyes.

She looked very different from the Hilda with whom I had parted a week or two before. I went up to her and touched her arm.

Digitized by Google

"Let us come here and have a talk. You have been away quite a long time. Has anything happened, Hilda? You look as though you had something nice to tell me."

"I have," she answered simply. "Eric Hawke is coming to us in a few days. He is coming after all."

"O Hilda!"

She looked at me with a beaming smile in her eyes. How wonderfully her face had changed during the last few months, I thought. It used to look rather cross and discontented; now it was quite beautiful in expression.

"And is it—I mean are you—? Do tell me what has happened, Hilda?"

"I hardly know myself. Nigel has done it. We both wrote to him—mother and I, and somehow everything is coming right."

"Do you mean you are engaged? Has Lady Lavender consented? Do tell me all about it, Hilda."

"Mother has consented that he shall come and speak to her himself. She has written to him again to say that her first letter was written under a misapprehension as to several matters. He is to come and see us again; and O Cissy, I am almost sure everything will be right. Mamma is quite, quite different about it, and so much kinder to me."

"What has made the difference?" I asked.

"Nigel has done it," she answered.

Digitized by Google

"There has been something else, too," I answered quickly. "It is partly because you have been so good and obedient, I am sure, Hilda. I was talking about it to Aunt Joan last night—you know she always hears everything through mother. She said that a blessing always followed upon obedience to parents, even though —oh, well, never mind that. You were obedient, and you have been rewarded. I am so glad!"

Hilda's face flushed; she made a little gesture as though to stop me.

"You must not praise me," she said; "it makes me ashamed, for I had so many rebellious thoughts." She stopped for a time, flushed, and grew pale again, and finally added in a very low whisper, "Cissy, I believe I know why it really came right. Because I prayed about it—asked that it might be settled for me—in the way God wished. It was very hard to give up wanting to try for my own way; but I think that was the reason why He gave it me after a little while."

I knew it must have cost reserved Hilda a great effort to say this. I think she knew, perhaps, that I should value her words the more because they were so rare, and because I was often in perplexity myself how to consecrate my life and make it something more than one of mere pleasure-seeking and amusement. Perhaps I was more self-willed than I knew in some ways. I felt a little qualm of remorse run through me as I recollected sundry acts of omission and commission of which I had

Digitized by Google

been guilty at various times. I could not put my thoughts into words—they were too vague and confused—but I squeezed Hilda's hand hard in token of sympathy, and then left her and crossed over to Amy, who was looking, I thought, rather forlorn.

Amy had not been very interesting to me since she became so engrossed in her engagement; and yet I had known her all my life, so that we were very intimate after a fashion. I sat beside her, and took her hand to examine sundry new rings upon it.

"What a lot of things Mr. Clarence gives you, Amy." I said; "and how pretty they are! You must have quite a jewel-case full of his presents by now."

Amy always liked to talk of these subjects, and she brightened up as she displayed various pretty trinkets which she wore on her dress.

"He does give me a great many things; most of these were Christmas presents. He is very, very generous. But—" Here she paused and sighed, and I asked curiously,—

"But what, Amy?"

"I sometimes wish he would give me fewer presents and more of himself!"

"O Amy! but he is ever so much in love."

She smiled again at that.

"Yes, he does care for me—I am sure of that," she said; "and yet he does not give me all his confidence."

"What do you mean, Amy?"

Digitized by Google

I am not quite sure now whether I was right in asking such a question, or Amy in answering it. But she was one of those girls who like to talk of their affairs, and even of their troubles; and, of course, I was interested in the love-affairs of a friend I had known all my life. I was sorry for Amy too, because she looked troubled and appealing. She had a clinging sort of way with her that always made one want to help and take care of her. Besides, just now anything interested me in which Colonel Clarence or any relation of his was mixed up.

"Something is troubling Edward," she answered. "He has got something on his mind; but he will not tell me what it is, and puts me off with kisses and caresses, as though I were a child. I am not a child, and I am going to be his wife. I think he ought to share the trouble with me."

I thought the same; but I wanted to console Amy, and I debated what I could best say.

"Perhaps a long time ago—before he knew you—he might have cared for somebody else," I suggested, diving into the recesses of my imagination, for I had no experiences to go upon, "and perhaps he is afraid to tell you, lest it should make you angry, and so he feels troubled."

But Amy shook her head.

"I don't think it's that," she answered; "for I told him once about Bernard Grey—you know we were very

Digitized by Google

fond of each other once, and I thought I should have married him. But Edward only smiled when he heard. And when I asked if he had ever cared for anybody else before me, he told me that he had, but that it was all over years and years ago; and I am sure he spoke the truth. I don't think it's that."

"And you don't know anything?"

"Hardly anything. I don't even know if he meant *this* thing when he spoke. But once he said in a very bitter voice that a man who had once done a great wrong to his friend, and saw no way of putting that wrong right, was the most miserable creature on the face of the earth. And when he was speaking, I thought he must mean himself, such a terrible look came into his face. But he wouldn't say anything more, and doesn't like me to speak about it. Yet I always have the feeling that there is something on his mind now, and oh, how I wish he would tell it to me!"

At that moment the door opened, and in came all the men. I had no desire to engross Amy then, and I jumped up and slipped away into the recess behind mother's couch.

My head felt all in a whirl, for a sudden strange thought had come to me. Could it be possible that Mr. Clarence had had something to do with the misunderstanding between Sister and the colonel? Could he have done something wicked which had separated them? And was this the reason he became so ghastly white on

Digitized by Google

seeing Sister's pictured face in my book, and why he was so strangely reserved and constrained in his manner towards his cousin?

Could it possibly be so—oh, could it? I pressed my hands to my head to try to command my thoughts.

I started with almost a passionate sense of anger and irritation as a voice spoke to me. Could I not have a moment's peace to myself?

"Will you come on to the terrace and look at the moonlight?" said Nigel at my elbow. "It is wonderfully beautiful there to-night, and not cold."

"No, I won't!" I answered, quite snappishly; "it's much nicer here indoors. Moonlight is all very well in summer; but at Christmas—"

I turned from him with an impatient movement, and encountered the soft, grave rebuke of mother's eyes. Nigel had already moved away.

"That was not very kind or polite, Cissy."

"O mother, I am sorry; but I want to stay here with you. You won't send me away, will you?"

She took my hand, and her fingers closed over it tenderly; and yet I heard her breathe a little sigh.

I thought of Hilda's words of a few minutes ago. Was I becoming selfish and self-engrossed, and heedless whether or not I pleased my gentle mother? Oh, I must try to turn over a new leaf and be better! But why did she like Nigel so much better than I did?

Digitized by Google

CHAPTER XVI.

AUNT JOAN AS AN ALLY.

"A PENNY for your thoughts, child!"

I started with the vague idea that somebody had spoken, and met a smiling glance from Aunt Joan's observant eyes.

"I beg your pardon, Aunt Joan; did you speak to me?"

"I have spoken to you more than once, my dear, but you have not condescended to reply."

"O Aunt Joan, I am so sorry! Indeed I did not hear."

Aunt Joan and I were alone that afternoon. It was the day after Christmas, and a disagreeable change had taken place in the weather. A driving rain from the south-west blotted out the landscape, and the wind lashed the waters of the harbour into great waves. I could not have got across to see Sister, even if I had been quite certain that she was ready for a visit. The boys had taken the colonel up to Eagle's Crag to play billiards; but I had declined to accompany them. I did not feel

Digitized by Google

disposed either for the wet walk or for the society of the Lavenders. Mother had a headache, and was lying upstairs, with drawn blinds, trying to sleep; Aunt Joan and I had the drawing-room to ourselves, and had been very quiet for some time over our books.

The light had begun to fade. I had put down my book some time since, and indeed I might as well have given up the farce of reading from the first, as I had not a notion of any single thing that I had read. I suppose I was very much absorbed in my own meditations, if they deserved that name, for they were very tangled and chaotic, as I certainly had not heard myself addressed before; but when I looked penitently at Aunt Joan, I saw a look upon her face which bespoke both comprehension and sympathy.

Just at that moment the arrival of the tea equipage prevented further talk for a few minutes; but when we were again alone, with drawn curtains, a dancing fire, and only one shaded lamp some little distance away, we drew together naturally in a cosy fashion, and Aunt Joan said, in her kind, crisp way,—

"I think that you and I had better talk this thing out together, child; two heads are sometimes better than one."

I looked at her in honest amaze.

"O Aunt Joan, what do you mean?" I asked eagerly, for a great longing had come over me to find somebody to confide in, and Aunt Joan was always

Digitized by Google

known to be a perfectly safe counsellor and confidante.

"I mean," answered Aunt Joan quietly, "this perplexing piece of business about Miss Lucas and Colonel Clarence."

"O Aunt Joan, how did you know?"

"Miss Lucas herself told me a good deal yesterday when I went to see her," answered Aunt Joan. "She realized, after she had got home the day following the ball, that she had laid rather a heavy burden upon you in telling you something respecting a guest in your house which must give you pain, and which you would regard as a secret. So when I called upon her, she not only admitted me, but she spoke to me of herself, and told me the story which once she told to you. So now, my dear, you need not be afraid of speaking openly to me, because I know everything myself."

"O Aunt Joan, I am so glad! I have wanted somebody to talk to so very, very much. Aunt Joan, can you make it out at all? Were there ever two nicer people than Sister and Garth's colonel? I can't believe it of him. And you know Garth says that he was jilted by a woman, and has never married because he can't forget her. What can it mean?"

"I am as much perplexed as you are, Cissy," answered Aunt Joan. "I talked to Colonel Clarence a good deal yesterday evening, and he certainly impresses me very favourably. All that we hear of him is in his favour.

Digitized by Google

He appears a singularly chivalrous and high-minded man. I cannot at all understand the matter. But I have the feeling that there has been some mistake or misunderstanding, and that perhaps if we could bring the ex-lovers face to face by mutual agreement, some mystery might be cleared up."

"O Aunt Joan! but would they agree to meet?"

"I cannot tell. I am very much afraid of intermeddling in other people's affairs. It is a very risky thing to do, as we learn when we grow older. People often do untold mischief with the very best of intentions. And yet there are times when one longs to help to straighten out what seems to be a tangled skein. But we must not act rashly or in haste."

I was thinking deeply, intently. Surely now had come the moment for making a clean breast of everything.

"Aunt Joan," I said suddenly, "do you like Mr. Clarence?"

"I know so little of him, Cissy, I can hardly express an opinion. He does not take my fancy as the colonel does. But what has that to do with it?"

"I don't know; but, Aunt Joan, may I tell you something that has come into my head?"

"Certainly."

"I have a sort of feeling that Mr. Clarence may know something that we don't—that he may have had something to do with this mystery."

"What makes you think so?"

Digitized by Google

"I'll tell you. I've been thinking and thinking, and trying to piece things together, and now it is pieced it really does seem— Well, Aunt Joan, I'll just tell it you as I have got it in my head now, and you shall see if it strikes you as it did me. Firstly, when Amy told me about her engagement, we found out that Colonel Clarence was cousin to Mr. Clarence, and that they had been almost like brothers once. But Hilda told me that Mr. Clarence always looked odd when his cousin was mentioned, and that they had not met for a great many years. Now, Aunt Joan, you know that they first met in this house—in this room. And two things happened that night. Just before dinner, Mr. Clarence got hold of my sketch-book, which I had left lying about, and I saw him turning it over. I was vexed, for I hate my daubs to be seen: so I watched him, and suddenly he grew as white as a sheet, and his hand shook; and I came behind him to see what it was he was looking at, and it was a head I had made of Sister!"

Aunt Joan's eyes dilated slightly, as they did when she was thinking deeply; but she only made a little sign for me to go on.

"Perhaps you remember that when Colonel Clarence and he met, just afterwards, he was looking ghastly, and the colonel said something about it; or perhaps you did not hear. At dinner he seemed hardly able to answer him, and he hardly ate anything, and after

Digitized by Google

dinner he was very quiet; but once he got hold of me and the book (which he had hidden away out of sight at first), and asked me who it was. He was very odd in his manner then; but I got away from him, and took the book with me, and gave him no real answer. A few days afterwards Amy borrowed my sketch-book, because she said Mr. Clarence wanted her to copy one of the drawings for him. I had cut the head of Sister out, and I gave her the book. But I believe the real thing he wanted was to find out all about Sister, and how I had come to get a picture of her."

Aunt Joan was looking into the fire very gravely. I did not at all know what impression my words were making. Even to myself the tale sounded rather lame and impotent; but then I had the memory of the drawn face and ghastly pallor which had so startled me in Mr. Clarence.

"Is there anything else?" asked Aunt Joan.

"There's this—that latterly, since that time, Hilda has told me that Amy's engagement has not been quite so happy; and Amy has told me herself that Mr. Clarence seems changed—that he has a weight on his mind, and that she is sure he is keeping something from her. She does not think he cares less for her, but something is the matter. Aunt Joan, it may be a foolish fancy of mine, but it came into my head that perhaps he had had something to do with spoiling Sister's life, and

Digitized by Google

that he wants to ask her forgiveness or something. Perhaps he had almost forgotten about it till he saw her portrait, and that brought it all back. And don't you think, perhaps, it is that that makes him so odd with Colonel Clarence? Garth has noticed it, and can't understand. But perhaps he knows he has done him a wrong somehow. I can't make it out, but I have a sort of feeling. Aunt Joan, do you think he could possibly have had anything to do with it?"

Aunt Joan's face was very grave and thoughtful.

"Do you think he has the least idea that Miss Lucas is living in this place?"

"I don't think so. You know the Lavenders never speak of her. It is a sore subject with Lady Lavender, and I don't think Amy ever gives it a thought. She is wrapped up in her own affairs."

"Have you got the sketch still by you?"

"Yes: I kept it, though I cut it out of the book."

"Will you let me see it?"

I fetched it at once, and Aunt Joan looked at it, and said,—

"It is a good likeness. You have caught the expression." And then, after a little pause, she said,—

"Why did you not answer Mr. Clarence's question when he asked who it was?"

"It seemed like betraying Sister. I knew she had come to be out of the way of everybody. I was afraid of saying anything."

Digitized by Google

I could not read the expression upon Aunt Joan's face, but I knew that she was thinking deeply.

"May I keep this for a time?" she asked; and I assented at once.

"What do you think about it, Aunt Joan?" I ventured to ask by-and-by, as she did not speak.

"I hardly know what to think," was the reply. "It is a curious bit of business. But perhaps in a short time I shall know more. Meantime, child, try to get the matter off your mind. You are beginning to look quite pale with all this thinking and worrying. I am glad we have had it out together, and that I know what is the cause of it all, and just how the land lies as far as you can tell me. Now we will try to put it aside for a little while, for too much worrying over our neighbours' affairs is good neither for us nor for them."

I was so much relieved by sharing the burden with Aunt Joan that I was able to be much more like myself that evening. We spent it merrily enough in music and talk, and I was more and more drawn towards Colonel Clarence, who was a delightful guest when one grew to know him better. He told the most fascinating tales of camp life in distant lands; and he had had his share of adventure in wild-beast and big-game hunting too. He never would be the hero of his own stories. According to him, it was always some other fellow who did the daring deeds, but some-

Digitized by Google

how one knew all the while that he had taken his share with infinite coolness and courage; and when asked sometimes what he had been doing at a certain moment, it would come out that he had been in the forefront of the peril all along.

Now and again my eyes met those of Aunt Joan, and she would give me a little smile. I think we were both reaching the same conclusion, which was that it would be perfectly impossible for a man like Colonel Clarence to act towards Sister in the way in which she had believed him to do. Moreover, how had it come about that he had believed himself thrown over by the woman he loved? No, there must be something we did not understand; but who could find it out and put it right? It was too hard to think that both these people should suffer the sense of pain and loss all their lives.

Next day there was great excitement in Fair Haven, because a shoal of porpoises had been seen not far away. The sea was pretty rough still, but not too rough for boats; and we all went out to see the sight, and most amusing it was.

Nigel was out in his boat too, but alone, and he joined us, and took Garth and the colonel on board. Roy and I kept to our own boat, and amused ourselves in our own way. We were too far away to get home for luncheon; but by-and-by we returned—Nigel getting the colonel and the boys to accompany

Digitized by Google

him back to Eagle's Crag to have some more billiards, whilst I went home to change my wet dress, preferring the comfort of one's own fireside to anything else, though Nigel included me in the invitation.

Aunt Joan was not in when first I ensconced myself by the fire, but soon afterwards she came in in her furs and hat, and I saw upon her face a look which made me jump up and exclaim,—

"O Aunt Joan, you have found something out!"

She smiled, but made no direct answer, going up to her room, and spending a little time with mother before she rejoined me. I had tea ready for her by that time, and was in a fever of impatience. I made her sit down in the big chair by the fire, and I brought her her cup, and hung over her, looking into her smiling eyes as I asked breathlessly,—

"O Aunt Joan, do tell me! have you found it out?"

"I think I have. I think it will soon be all put right, in one sense of the word." Then Aunt Joan looked more grave, as she added, "Whether it can be put right in the other way, time only can show. It is not always that severed threads can be picked up again or torn lives mended. That is the penalty we all pay for our acts of indiscretion and our sins. We may repent, we may confess, we may strive to make amends, but the consequences are beyond us. We have to bear them to the end. God is just, as

Digitized by Google

well as merciful. He forgives, but He does not remove the consequences of our wrong-doing. That is the burden we all of us have to bear; and it is heaviest, I think, when it falls upon others, and we have to stand and see suffering and loss which we have caused, but which we cannot remove."

Aunt Joan spoke so gravely that I was awed. Her face looked to me like the face of a person who has been through some rather strong tension of feeling. I was trembling with excitement to know what had happened, but I waited until she had drunk her first cup of tea, which she did at one long draught, before I ventured to ask,—

"Can you tell me anything about it?"

"Well, I think it would be rather hard if I did not, seeing that it is you who have set the ball rolling. Do you know where I have been this afternoon, Cissy?"

"No. To Sister's?"

Aunt Joan shook her head. Then a sudden inspiration seemed to flash upon me, and I cried,—

"You have been with Mr. Clarence!"

"Yes. I have been taking him that picture of Miss Lucas that he wished so much to get hold of."

"O Aunt Joan!"

"Yes, child, that is what I have done. I have heard the whole story from beginning to end, and I will tell it to you in confidence; but, as you will see for yourself, it is not a thing which must go further. Mr.

Digitized by Google

Clarence is Amy Lavender's affianced husband. All this happened more than ten years ago, and he has repented bitterly of his action in the matter. Whatever can be done to make reparation will be done; and we must keep the secret, for the sake of every one concerned."

It was very exciting. I felt my colour coming and going. I wanted to hear the whole story, and I was not to be disappointed. Aunt Joan had a crisp and interesting way of telling even small and trivial things, and she recognized that details are interesting when one is really wrapped up in any subject.

"I went up to Eagle's Crag this afternoon, and I took your sketch with me, Cissy. Lady Lavender and the girls were at home, and Mr. Clarence was with them. At first it did not seem as though I should have any chance of speaking to him alone, without asking for a private interview, which I did not want to do; but presently other guests came in, and then the party split up, and presently Mr. Clarence and Amy moved off into the little boudoir beyond the drawing-room. He stayed there; but Amy presently came back, as more visitors were announced, and the room was getting full. This was my opportunity, and I wandered into the boudoir, and found Mr. Clarence there alone. I did not beat about the bush much. I did not know how soon we might be interrupted. I took out the sketch and laid it upon the table before

Digitized by Google

him, at first without speaking a word. But I watched his face, and I saw just how he must have looked that night when first his eyes rested upon it. There was no mistaking the change that passed over him, and the hands that held the paper shook nervously. He stood gazing at it like a man in a trance; then he raised his eyes and bent them upon mine. It was as though he were trying to read my very soul. He did not seem to know what to say, and his lips were dry. So I spoke first.

"'My niece was telling me a story yesterday, Mr. Clarence. I gathered from it that you wished to see this sketch again, and to know something about the original. If that is so, I can tell you something—provided, of course, that you can satisfy me that you have the right to make the inquiries.'

"He looked at me in a strange, bewildered way, and then asked in a sort of hoarse whisper,—

"'What do you know?'

"'I know very little; but I believe you knew Miss Lucas once. If you are anxious to know where she is now, I can tell you; but I must be satisfied first that you have a good reason for wishing to know.'

"'I have the very best reason,' he answered, in the same low tone. 'I was the means of doing Magdalen Lucas a most cruel injury many years ago. I have been longing to repair that injury as far as man may repair his evil deeds, but I have been balked at every

Digitized by Google

turn by the impossibility of finding her. If you can help me to the lost clue, I will bless you to my dying day!'"

"O Aunt Joan! Then it has been so? It was he who made the trouble?"

"Yes, Cissy; he has told me the whole story. It is a sad one, inasmuch as it shows the selfish, cruel side of a self-seeking nature; but on the other hand, as he is really and deeply penitent, and sees to the full the terrible nature of the deed he did in his selfish youth, I think I may say there is a bright side to the tale too; and as he is going to tell everything to Amy from first to last, I hope the cloud which has shadowed their happiness of late will vanish altogether away."

"He will tell Amy!"

"Oh yes; it is his great wish now to do away with all concealments. Now that he has it in his power to make such reparation as frank and full confession can do, he will hold nothing back. I think that Amy will forgive him, because she loves him with all her heart, and he loves her. I think it is her trust and belief in his nobility and honour that has helped to give him the desire and the courage to unveil the secret sin of his life, and put all straight as far as can be done."

"Oh, tell me the story, Aunt Joan!"

"I will, child—it is due to you to know all; and indeed you have guessed the substance, though not the details. Nobody could do that without knowing the

Digitized by Google

circumstances of the case. Give me another cup of tea, and I will tell you everything."

I did so, and after a few minutes Aunt Joan began, speaking rather slowly, as though recalling what had been said to her, and piecing it connectedly together.

"It seems, as I think you know, that Colonel Clarence and his cousin were brought up almost like brothers by Edward's father. I will call them Edward and Edgar now, for the sake of brevity. Edward was heir to his father's property, which was a very fair one. Edgar had little but his profession, although he had expectations from a more distant relation, which, however, he was not likely to realize till middle life.

"Edward's father was Edgar's guardian, and soon after the boys, who were much of an age, had attained their majority, he died, leaving Edward master of the estate and income. Edgar was by that time just launched upon his career as a soldier, but he made his cousin's house his home whenever he had leave, and they kept up their affection for each other through all the years which followed.

"They had been separated for a rather unusually long period, when Edgar wrote to announce his engagement to Magdalen Lucas, and to invite his cousin to come and make the acquaintance of the lady and her father. This he presently did; and before he had seen Magdalen many times, he found himself falling hopelessly in love with her."

Digitized by Google

"O Aunt Joan, was that it?"

"No thought, however, of doing any wrong to Edgar ever entered his head. He went away shortly, without giving a sign, and to this very day Colonel Clarence is in absolute ignorance that his cousin ever bestowed a single thought upon his betrothed beyond that of ordinary friendship."

"That is why he is always so nice to Mr. Clarence?"

"He has no reason to be otherwise. He knows nothing whatever of those after events which made such wreck of the happiness of two lives."

"O Aunt Joan, tell me!"

"The engagement went happily onward. Miss Lucas has told you how matters were arranged between the lovers. All was smiling and prosperous, when just before the marriage the breaking out of war in Africa, and the sudden death of Mr. Lucas, changed everything. Now comes the plot of the story. It is a little intricate, but it can easily be understood. Edgar had gone off to join his regiment, and was in all the bustle of departure for abroad. He had arranged with Magdalen that all letters should be addressed to him at his cousin's house. Edward would have his addresses, and would transact all his business for him. It seemed the best plan for all letters to go through one channel, and these cousins had always been like brothers. No thought of treachery in such matters ever entered Edgar's head;

Digitized by Google

nor had it entered Edward's, until the temptation suddenly beset him.

"The news of Mr. Lucas's sudden death, therefore, came to Edward first. Magdalen wrote direct to him, as well as to her lover. Just at that moment Edward had no exact knowledge of his cousin's whereabouts. Edgar was flying hither and thither, and for a few days there was no getting the letter to him. It was quickly followed by another brief note from Magdalen, telling of her father's ruin, and of her own absolute change of position. It enclosed one to Edgar offering to set him free.

"It was then that the temptation took hold upon Edward. To do him justice, we must remember that he honestly thought it would be the ruin of Edgar's career for him to marry a penniless woman. He knew enough of the life of poor officers to be sincerely sorry for Magdalen to be exposed to such a thing. He was also desperately in love with her himself, although up to this moment he had never permitted himself to think of her except as the betrothed of his cousin.

"Now it came upon him like a flood—the conviction that if only Magdalen would give up Edgar he could soon console her for the loss. Was he not like Edgar? Had they not often been mistaken one for the other? If he had not quite Edgar's charm in some ways, he was the more cultivated man in other matters, and he was wealthy, and could surround her with every luxury.

Digitized by Google

Hardly knowing what he meant to do or say, he went to see her, and her pathetic beauty and sweetness in the hour of her trouble (for she received him as a friend, and talked to him as to the brother of her affianced husband) completed his subjugation. He felt that he would do and dare anything to win her for his wife."

"Oh, I can understand that!" I whispered.

"Magdalen was wondering why she had heard nothing from Edgar, and there he made the first false step—told the first falsehood. He said the letters had been duly forwarded (which they had not been), and then in some dexterous way he managed to hint that he feared the loss of Magdalen's fortune would be regarded by Edgar as a very great bar to their marriage. He saw her face change as he spoke. He knew he had made the first move in the game.

"It is always the first step that costs, as the French say; each succeeding one becomes more easy. When he got home that night, he sat down and wrote a letter to Magdalen, purporting to be from Edgar, putting an end to the engagement, and bidding her a final farewell."

"Oh," I cried, "forgery!"

"In intent, yet not exactly in fact. The signatures of the two men at that time, as well as their handwritings, were almost indistinguishable. Both signed their letters 'Ed. Clarence;' it was with a hardly perceptible effort that he formed his letters so as to resemble

Digitized by Google

those of Edgar to the very life. With this letter in his pocket he went down to the place where he now knew Edgar to be, in all the bustle of departure; and there he posted this letter, and went to find his cousin."

"But Colonel Clarence would never give her up because she was poor!" I cried hotly.

"Colonel Clarence was Captain Clarence then—a young man of very ardent feelings and very sensitive temperament. What passed between the two I know only in outline. Edgar had never had reason in all his life before to doubt Edward's affection or integrity. When he told him that he had been to Magdalen's father's funeral, he started up, and asked why he had not been told of the death; but Edward answered, with pain in his voice, that things had happened to change everything, and that he had come as Magdalen's messenger, instead of her trusting her messages to the uncertainties of letters which might miscarry. Then he went on to say that she recognized the hopelessness of their betrothal, and gave him back his liberty. She would not be a drag upon him, and everything was different from when they had plighted their troth. Edgar, stung to the quick, declared that if she loved him still nothing need be changed between them. And then Edward delivered his Parthian shaft, by saying that he believed the truth to be that there was already some wealthy lover ready to come forward if only the coast were clear, and that his advice to Edgar was to

Digitized by Google

accept this dismissal as final, as he believed was Magdalen's real wish.

"Perhaps at a different time, and under different circumstances, things might have gone otherwise. But Edward had timed his visit within twelve hours of the departure of the regiment. It was no time for consecutive thought or lengthy argument. Edward adroitly showed that if the girl really dreaded poverty, and was ready to think of a wealthier suitor, if once her liberty were given her, it would be cruelty to stand in her way of happiness; and one such hint as this was enough for the impetuous, chivalrous young captain. He told Edward to go back and tell Magdalen that she was free. He did not even suggest writing to her, and Edward never meant him to do so. He stayed with him till the ship sailed, and then he knew that there was no danger of any further correspondence; and long before Edgar would come home again he meant to have made Magdalen Lucas his wife."

"Oh, the wretch!"

"Yes; but let us remember that he was very much in love, and a young man soon loses his head under such circumstances. Also remember that he sincerely believed he could make Magdalen happier than his cousin could, and that he longed to surround her with luxury, and live for her and her alone. But he was soon to find that he had sinned in vain. Magdalen would have nothing to say to him. He approached her

Digitized by Google

many times, but always to receive the same sad reply She had loved only Edgar; she should never love anybody else. Still she never suspected Edward, and would have continued to rank him as a friend had not his persistency half frightened her at last; and she suddenly took flight—he never knew where—and from that day to this he had never been able to trace her out or learn what had become of her."

"Oh!" I cried. "Now I understand his face when he saw my sketch."

"Yes; it came upon him like a thunderbolt. For he had by that time almost forgotten, and had tried to think that Edgar had forgotten too, and would never care or think about his lost love. But all those years he had carried about an uneasy conscience. He had never been able to bring himself to meet his cousin face to face, though often invited by Edgar to come out and meet him in this place or the other. He encouraged him to continue in foreign service, for any thought of meeting brought back with hideous distinctness the thought of the wrong he had done.

"Again and again he would have striven to confess and make amends, only he was fearful of awakening old griefs and opening old wounds without the means of healing them. Suppose Magdalen were married now —as was most probable—what solace would it be to Edgar to know the truth? No; it were better he should believe her fickle than know he had lost her so cruelly.

Digitized by Google

"And then came his meeting with the Lavenders, and his genuine falling in love with Amy—he who had never expected to love a woman again; who had thought himself a confirmed bachelor."

"Oh!" I cried. "Fancy anybody who had once cared for Sister falling in love with Amy Lavender!"

Aunt Joan smiled. I think the same thought had crossed her own mind, but she knew more of the vagaries of the blind god than I, and was perhaps less astonished.

"Well, however strange you may think it, he did fall in love; and yet he was man enough to feel oppressed by the weight of the unconfessed crime (so he called it, and not without truth), which lay like a load on his spirit. But though he could not bring his mind to speak out to anybody, he often felt, to use his own expression, 'like a cur;' and he was the more uncomfortable for the conviction that Nigel had an instinct that all was not quite above board about him, and that made him horribly uncomfortable often."

"Hilda felt it just as much."

"That may be, though I think she took her feeling from Nigel. However, things were going on like this when he saw that drawing, and the whole thing came over him again. He tried to find out whose head it was—or rather how you had obtained it—but he was always foiled, and did not like to press the matter. It was a very painful subject, one can understand. But the thought of his guilty secret weighed upon him like a

Digitized by Google

nightmare, and has been changing him, as Amy found. He had almost come to the point of telling her all. Now he will do so; and he will see Miss Lucas almost at once, and make a full confession to her."

I sprang to my feet in my excitement.

"He is going to do that!"

"It is his great desire."

"But will she see him?" I faltered.

Aunt Joan gave me an odd little smile as she replied,—

"I am going to take him to The Hermitage to-morrow. I think I can arrange for an interview."

Digitized by Google

CHAPTER XVII.

NEW-YEAR'S EVE.

HOW the days did drag! how the wind did blow! It seemed as though we should never have weather again fair enough to cross the harbour.

My excitement was so great that I felt unable to do anything or settle to anything. I was allowed to tell the story to Roy, and we were never tired of discussing it in all its bearings as we paced to and fro upon the terraces or sat over the crackling fires together. But just for the moment the weather kept us from any visit to the other side of the water, and I fumed in vain in impotent impatience.

"My dear child," said Aunt Joan, with one of her quick laughs, as I stood looking, with despair in my eyes, across the driving waters of the harbour, "people who have waited for years can wait yet a few days for their happiness. You may be sure it will not spoil in the keeping that little time."

But it was so hard to wait.

It had been Saturday night when I heard all the

Digitized by Google

tale. On Monday I had made up my mind that the gale would have dropped, and that Aunt Joan and Mr. Clarence should visit Sister, and tell the all-important story. But Monday passed, and Tuesday, and still the waves rolled and leaped; and I could not urge Aunt Joan to make the long, long circuit by Queensbridge and all round when perhaps the next day might make the ferry passable.

My chief solace was in talking to Roy about it all, and in speculating upon Colonel Clarence's action when he should be told. I knew by that time that directly Mr. Clarence had made his confession to Sister, he was going to tell his cousin everything. Meantime the colonel knew nothing, save that Sister was living somewhere in this neighbourhood, and that we knew her.

Once or twice before this he had put a tentative question to me about her; but I had answered with great reserve. Now I felt no such reserve at all. The first time he gave me the chance I opened out, and told him a great deal about her—how she had made friends with us; how she had taken care of Roy, and nursed him herself, when he had that horrid accident at her doors; and how very, very good she had been to him all that time.

He listened to everything with undivided attention. There was no trace now of that slight bitterness with which he had at first received what I told him about Sister.

Digitized by Google

I remembered how at the ball I had been almost angered by the tone of his voice as he had replied to my words; but now his manner was quite different. Indeed he once said softly,—

"Yes; I know what a nurse she can be. I have had experience myself."

I looked at him, asking no questions, nor betraying that I knew anything; and as he did not explain, I presently said,—

"I thought the first time I spoke of her having been a nurse that you hardly believed me."

He sat with his chin on his hand, looking very thoughtfully upon the ground before him.

"That was afterwards," he said slowly; and then seeming to realize that his words were not very clear, he added, "What I mean is, that I believed Miss Lucas had married shortly after the time when I used to know her. I was rather astonished to hear you speak as though she had been nursing of late years. I knew that she had done so once."

My heart beat rather fast, there were so many things I should have liked to say; but I was afraid if I once began my tongue would run away with me, so I kept silence, and presently Colonel Clarence said,—

"Does she often come here?"

"No; she has only been once—when she came to take me to the ball. She does not go out generally. She is not at all strong. I think she has had a great

Digitized by Google

deal of trouble. She lives on the other side of the harbour, and she hardly sees anybody."

He did not say anything for a long while, and then remarked in a low voice, as if speaking to himself,—

"I wonder why that is."

"I always think when I talk to her," I ventured to repeat, "that she has had a great deal of trouble and some great sorrow. I felt that about her from the very first, and I always feel it."

He flashed one quick, keen look at me; but I do not think I betrayed anything. Soon afterwards I got up and went away. I wanted to ask Roy whether the wind was not dropping. I had not heard it singing round the house as it had been for so many days past.

That was last evening. To-day was New-Year's Eve, and I was in a perfect fever of anticipation; for at last—at last the storm had calmed down, and Aunt Joan and Mr. Clarence had gone across the ferry to pay a visit at The Hermitage.

They had been gone a long time now, and it was already dark. I had waited tea half an hour for Aunt Joan, and then we had ordered it up, for she still did not come.

I had gone to my room early to dress for dinner, so that the moment Aunt Joan came back I might be ready to go to her and hear her tale. She would tell it to me whilst I helped her to dress. For to-night we all dined at Eagle's Crag, taking our guest with us. Lady

Digitized by Google

Lavender had fixed New-Year's Eve for the dinner this year; sometimes it was on New-Year's Day, sometimes on the eve of the day. My hands shook as I donned my dinner finery. I was listening all the while for the sound of Aunt Joan's footstep on the stairs. I was so restless that even good-tempered Mary complained of me, and said she would never get my hair to look right, and that her ladyship would not be pleased.

However, I was just finished and ready before I heard Aunt Joan's voice. She was speaking to mother on her way upstairs. The next minute I had rushed out, and was almost dragging her into her own room.

"I am going to help Lady Joan to-night," I remarked to Mary, who would have followed; and that good soul seemed to scent something in the air, for she retired discreetly, and I stood over Aunt Joan, almost panting in my excitement.

"Well, tell me, tell me!"

"Why, child, what a state you are in! Yes, I will tell you as much as I know myself. You don't suppose I was present at the interview, do you?"

"I don't know. I can't think about anything. Do tell me that it is all right."

"It is all right as far as the frank and full confession of wrong-doing can put right a great wrong," answered Aunt Joan. "Magdalen Lucas knows now that she was deceived and betrayed by a man whom she trusted, although she never loved him—never even thought of

Digitized by Google

him as a lover at that crisis of her fate. She knows that Colonel Clarence was true to her all through, and only gave her up through misrepresentation. She knows everything, and she has forgiven the man who wronged her."

"I was sure she would do that. She is so sweet and good. Will you tell me all about it, Aunt Joan?"

"It is not a very long story. I went in first, and there was Miss Lucas alone by her fire with your dog on her knees. After we had talked a little, I told her that I had come upon a rather strange errand—that some person who had in the past done her a grievous wrong was most anxious to obtain permission to see her and confess his fault. I told her that I had promised to try to obtain the interview, and asked if she would see him.

"She turned very pale, and hesitated a moment, and then asked who it was. I said his name was Edward Clarence, and at that she grew whiter still; but when I said it was a case where it would be cruelty to refuse the interview, she signed that I might bring him in. But she asked me not to be far away, speaking in a voice which was little more than a whisper. So that when I had brought Mr. Clarence to the door, and had motioned to him to go in, I remained waiting in the next room until I should be wanted again."

"Then you did not hear what they said?"

I suppose there was a little disappointment in my tone, for Aunt Joan smiled as she replied,—

Digitized by Google

"No, Cissy, I certainly did not; and I did not wish to."

"I think I should have wanted to," I said slowly.

Aunt Joan looked at me with a smile in her eyes.

"Not if you were as old as I am, child. You would have learned by that time not to desire to know too much of the secret of other hearts and lives. Be ready to help when help is asked of you, but never encourage under the name of sympathy an idle curiosity about affairs which do not concern you, and which are often very sacred in the eyes of those whom they do concern. It is better to know too little rather than too much of your neighbours' affairs."

"But if they want to tell you?"

"That is another matter. Always show readiness to listen. But beware of taking advantage of a moment of expansion. You will find out, as you grow older, that sometimes in intimate conversation a friend or acquaintance will almost want to tell a private and secret matter which perhaps had better not be told. A very little encouragement on your part, and the words would be spoken; and perhaps afterwards the teller would bitterly repent the confidence, and you would feel that it had made rather a barrier than a bond between you. Be careful how you accept such impulsive confidences. I give you that warning, child, because you are a girl of quick sympathies and easily-stirred emotions. People are likely to trust you with their

Digitized by Google

confidence as you go on in life. Remember to distinguish carefully between true sympathy and mere curiosity. Don't dwarf the one, but don't encourage the other. Try to strike a happy medium, and you may be the means of bringing much happiness to many lives, as I trust you will be the indirect agent of doing in the case of Magdalen Lucas."

My heart gave a bound as I heard these words. Did Aunt Joan really think that I had done anything in this business? It seemed to me as though she had really done it all. I had only stood by; and I realized in hearing her speak what a great truth there was in her words, and how noble an example she herself was of one who could give honest, sincere sympathy and help, yet without any of the intrusive curiosity which so often mars this sort of kindness. Aunt Joan had no intention of holding herself up for a model, as I very well knew; yet I was perfectly conscious that if I could only be as wise and kind as she was, I should be perfectly satisfied with myself.

"Aunt Joan, do you really mean that you think I have had anything to do with this?"

"A good deal, my dear. You have set the ball rolling anyhow. So far as I see, although the coincidence of the Clarences coming to the very place where Magdalen Lucas is in hiding (if one can use such an expression) is at the bottom of it all in one sense, yet, but for your determination to make friends with her and bring

Digitized by Google

a little sunshine into her lonely life, they might all have been living within a bow-shot of one another for months, and never have met."

"It does seem strange, does it not, Aunt Joan? But you have not half finished your story yet."

"Well, there is not such a great deal to tell. After rather a long time I was asked to join the other two in the drawing-room; and Miss Lucas gave us tea. It was not a very easy thing to sit talking there; but as we all knew the whole story, we presently threw off our constraint. I think Miss Lucas wanted to keep us to break bread in her house as a token of her complete forgiveness of the man who had done her such a cruel injury once. Her face was very pale indeed, but she was quite tranquil and composed; and when we rose to go, she pressed my hands, and thanked me very earnestly for what I had done. I was not really the person to whom thanks were due, as I told her; but she only smiled when I said so. She looked rather like a woman moving and speaking in a dream. I think she felt as though she were in a dream all the time."

"Did she speak of Colonel Clarence? Did she say anything about seeing him?"

"Not to me; but Mr. Clarence told her he was in the place, and she said, in reply to a question he asked, that if he wished to come she would see him."

"Was that all?"

Aunt Joan almost laughed at my rather blank face.

Digitized by Google

"Silly child! Do you think Miss Lucas wears her heart upon her sleeve? How is she to know that he has cherished her memory all these years? Not one man in a thousand would have done as much, thinking her false to him. Even we do not know his feelings towards her. We can only surmise what they are likely to be when he hears the truth from his cousin, as he will do to-night."

"To-night?"

"Yes. Mr. Clarence is not a man to do things by halves, nor to let grass grow under his feet. His repentance is very true and real; he has suffered much in the thought of the hurt he has done to two people, although at the time he meant to make the happiness of Magdalen Lucas's life by winning her love, and persuaded himself that he was acting for the best welfare of the lovers in separating them. But he recognizes that good can never come out of evil, and that he has not only gone far to spoil two other lives by his untruthfulness, but also his own."

"His own?"

"Yes; for Amy Lavender was terribly shocked when he told her the whole truth. She has made such a hero of him, and thought him all perfection. It was a great shock and trouble to her when he confessed the past. Not only had he cared once for somebody else—that perhaps she was prepared for—but he had fallen very low in order to gain his own way. I could see,

Digitized by Google

from his manner of telling me the tale, that he had been through a trying ordeal in confessing this to Amy."

I drew a deep breath of wonder.

"O Aunt Joan, I think I am rather glad of that; but I am very much surprised. I thought Amy was such a tame little creature that she would not care for anything if she were only sure she had his love still."

Aunt Joan's light laugh rang out as she turned to look me full in the face.

"When you are older and wiser, my dear, you will find out that your youthful estimate of people is not quite the correct one. We are very fond of labelling our friends and putting them aside with a few rather contemptuous phrases—when we are young. But they don't always stay in the niches we have assigned them. They have a way of walking out and asserting themselves in a fashion which shows them to be not so very inferior to ourselves after all."

I felt my colour rising, and I said quickly,—

"I am afraid you think me very proud and conceited and disagreeable, Aunt Joan."

"No, child, I do not—only a little opinionated and unjust; and I am not one to throw a stone. I was much worse at your age."

I put my arms round Aunt Joan's neck and kissed her. It was not a thing I often did, for neither she nor I was demonstrative in the main.

Digitized by Google

"If I could only be half as nice as you when I am as old as you are, I should not mind anything."

"Fiddle-de-dee!" answered Aunt Joan, laughing again. "I must get dressed, child, or I shall be late, and that I have never been in my life yet."

We walked up to Eagle's Crag in our furs, by the steep path through the gardens. It was a fine moonlight night, and as Aunt Joan said, it wasn't worth having the carriage out for that little distance.

The first person I noticed when we got into the drawing-room was Mr. Hawke, tall and dark, standing back against the yellow curtains—and Hilda at his side.

It quite made me jump, for I had not heard that he was really coming, or so soon. There was a new light upon Hilda's face when she came forward to greet us. She seemed to whisper something to me as she kissed me, though I could not hear what she said. But the one word I did hear was "Eric!" so I supposed it was all right.

Mr. Clarence looked very pale, I thought; but that restless, furtive glance which I had observed in his eyes before was quite gone now. He looked us all in the face without sign of flinching; although it must have been rather a trying ordeal for him, since some amongst us knew his story, and he perhaps did not know how many shared the knowledge.

I observed, too, that Nigel's manner towards him had changed. It had always been studiously polite,

Digitized by Google

though somewhat cold. Now he spoke to him with the easy familiarity of friendship, and appeared to single him out for kindly remark or question. When I looked at Amy, I thought I saw an expression of subdued content upon her face, although it was rather more pale and certainly more pensive than usual. She was not nearly so finely dressed as had been her way of late, and I thought she looked much prettier in consequence. Her face seemed to have more meaning in it; and I was rather touched by the expression in her eyes as they rested on the face of her lover. He went over to her a little before dinner was announced, and leaned over the chair where she was sitting. There was by no means the same easy confidence and appropriation of manner which had characterized him before; yet I thought he had never looked more thoroughly the lover, and I saw a little smile and flush steal into Amy's face. I think she was feeling that, in spite of his fall, Edward Clarence, repentant and humble, was dearer to her than he had been in the days of his lofty superiority and pride.

It was a lively dinner that night. The colonel was at his best with anecdote and quick repartee. Nigel was developing a talent for saying very amusing things in so dry and quiet a way that we seldom realized all they implied until a few seconds after, when we all burst into simultaneous laughter. Mr. Hawke was always interesting when he could be drawn into conversation, and he and Hilda sat together looking so happy

Digitized by Google

and content that it was good to see them. Roy and Garth were always merry and good company, and Aunt Joan was one of the best talkers I have ever met.

Lady Lavender certainly spoke less than her wont. I looked at her curiously from time to time, and felt sure that she was not quite her usual self, though whether this quieter self were more or less to be desired I did not know.

Dinner lasted some considerable time, and we sat rather long afterwards; for it was our way to drink a good many healths on this occasion, and we had so many good speech-makers that no one grew weary of the entertainment. Nigel had proposed more than one toast already, when he rose to his feet again, and said,—

"Ladies and gentlemen, I have one more toast to propose, which I am sure you will all be glad to drink with me. It is to the health of the newly-betrothed couple —my sister Hilda and my friend Eric Hawke;" and without a word more, Nigel raised his glass to his lips, and bowed towards the pair who sat together at the middle of the table—Hilda blushing, but with radiant eyes, and Mr. Hawke looking more handsome and happy than I had ever seen him in my life before.

We all seized our glasses; but somebody was beforehand with us. Lady Lavender had bent forward the first of all, and we heard her say in quiet accents, though I am sure the voice shook a very little,—

"I wish you every happiness, my children."

Digitized by Google

I could hardly believe my ears! "My children!" I was sure she had said it. Then she had consented—she had accepted Mr. Hawke as a son! Well, it was wonderful. I wondered how it had come about; but when we ladies left the room together, Hilda's arm was slipped within mine, and I heard her whisper in my ear,—

"Come into the conservatory. I want to talk with you. I am so happy I must tell somebody all about it."

We were soon alone in the dim, quiet retreat, and Hilda broke out quite excitedly for her,—

"You can't think how good mother has been. If ever I said a word against her, I take everything back now. I think I never knew till to-day how much she really cared for us. It was Nigel's doing, of course, that Eric came, and had his chance to speak to mother face to face, and to me too. But he and I both agreed that we would not be engaged without her consent. He said that he did not believe in a blessing following upon disobedience to parents, and we both thought that by-and-by, when mother saw we did not change, she would most likely give her consent, though we never thought it would be so soon. But when we went and told her, and said we left everything in her hands, O Cissy, she was so good to us! If Eric had been the very man of her choice, she could not have been nicer about it. And you heard her at dinner to-night, with everybody there to hear! Oh, I don't know how to be happy enough!

Digitized by Google

And all she asks is that we will wait a year, so that she does not lose both her daughters at once."

"Oh, I am so glad, Hilda—so very glad!"

"Yes, I am very happy. There is so much to do here now; and then there is the work waiting for me to do with him, when I shall have gained a little more experience first. We are quite ready to wait. It is enough to know that we belong each to the other. I would not for the world seem in a hurry to leave mother alone. Perhaps before that time comes things will be changed." Hilda spoke with a little hesitation, and then added, "Mother always says that if Nigel were ever to marry, and we had gone, she would go and live in Florence with Aunt Caroline. They have always had the idea of setting up together when they were growing old."

I said nothing, not knowing what to say. I had always hoped that Nigel would marry somebody nice, so that we might have a different Lady Lavender at Eagle's Crag; but I could not imagine the house without the dominating influence of the Lady Lavender I had always known. I turned the conversation by kissing Hilda again, and telling her how pleased I was to hear of her engagement.

Of course there was a good deal to say that was most interesting, and we lingered long in the conservatory together. I do not think that Hilda knew anything about Amy and her trouble, for she said that things

Digitized by Google

had all come right between them, and that Amy was nicer than ever, and had been very kind to her all through; but she did not seem to know of any reason for this change, and of course I said nothing. I began to hope that very few people would know, for the sake of Mr. Clarence, whom I now liked thoroughly, and pitied a good deal. I was quite sure he had told Nigel everything, and I was really beginning to like Nigel better than I had ever done. He was wonderfully quiet and unobtrusive, yet everything he put his hand to seemed to come right; and it was plain that those who knew him best liked and trusted him most fully. Mr. Clarence had no need to tell him anything about his private affairs; but I was perfectly certain from Nigel's subtle change of manner that a full confession had been made.

When we went back to the drawing-room, the gentlemen had come in—all save two, and those two were the colonel and his cousin. I guessed in a moment what was happening, and my heart beat rather fast. Colonel Clarence was learning the truth about Sister—that she had not given him up; that she had been deceived equally with himself. How terrible it must be for Mr. Clarence to tell such a story, and for the other to hear it! And yet not so bad as though she were lost to him. He knew where she was to be found, and he could go to her, without a cloud between them, on the morrow.

Digitized by Google

Amy and Hilda were singing a duet together, Mr. Hawke standing close to the piano listening and looking. Roy strolled up to his friend, and engaged him in intermittent talk. Garth was telling some story to Lady Lavender. I was rather excited, and moved away down the long room, and into the little boudoir beyond of which Aunt Joan had spoken the other day. I could not keep my thoughts away from the interview which I knew was going on in another room not far distant. I quite jumped when a voice spoke close at my elbow.

"Well, Cissy, it is a true saying that one marriage brings many. What do you say to our new pair of lovers?"

It was Nigel who spoke, but I hardly took in the sense of his words, I was thinking of quite a different matter.

"We don't know yet if they are lovers still," I answered quickly; and then stopped short, seeing my blunder.

"Well, they look rather like it to-night," said Nigel, ignoring the slip, if he noticed it, and I never knew Nigel fail in observation. "Are you not glad? Hawke is a very fine fellow. I know no man to whom I could so readily entrust a sister of mine as to him."

"We all like him very much," I answered. "I am very glad."

"So am I," he returned, leaning his shoulder against the high mantelshelf and looking down into the fire re-

Digitized by Google

flectively; "and yet I shall miss Hilda a good bit. She is helping me splendidly in lots of ways. I never knew before quite how helpful a woman could be. My fault, perhaps—but I never did."

I felt a curious sort of constraint fall upon me, which made me rather angry with myself. I did not make matters much better by answering quickly,—

"Well, Hilda is not going to be married for a year. Perhaps you will have plenty of helpers by then."

"I am not sure that I want plenty," answered Nigel, in his very quiet way; "but I want one very badly."

"Well, I should not think one would be very difficult to find," I answered, trying to be as nonchalant as he.

"Not to find, perhaps," he answered, and suddenly he looked straight at me, and I never knew before all that eyes could say in one flash, especially eyes like Nigel's, "but to get hold of—to hold and to keep for one's very own. Cissy, you could do all I want. You could be my helper—my helpmeet; but is it any good my even asking you? You have never liked me, yet I have always loved you—you and nobody else in all the wide world!"

When Nigel spoke there was no disbelieving him. I never knew anybody like him for that. I felt my heart give a great throb which turned me almost giddy; but I could not bear the feeling. My head was all in a whirl. I only longed to get away from him and that look in his eyes, and forget he had ever spoken such

Digitized by Google

words. I don't know whether I was angry or not; but I was confused, bewildered, distressed. I remember the prevailing feeling in my mind was that I was not half good enough to be anybody's wife and helpmeet, least of all Nigel's. I could not answer him a single word. I hardly knew whether he had asked me a question or not. I hastily turned, and fled from the room into the drawing-room beyond; and almost as I entered it by one door, another at the farther end opened, and Colonel and Mr. Clarence came in.

Excited and rather unnerved as I was, I could yet see the expression upon both their faces, and I caught at once the proud, soft gladness in the colonel's eyes. Mr. Clarence looked very pale, like a man who has gone through some searching experience; but he, too, was calm, and I thought there was a look of restful relief as he seated himself beside Amy and possessed himself of her fan.

They talked together softly behind its shelter. The colonel came almost straight up to me.

"I am going to ask a favour of you, Miss Wyverne," he said. "I am going to ask you to take me across the harbour in your boat to-morrow, to call upon Miss Lucas."

Digitized by Google

CHAPTER XVIII.

"A HAPPY NEW YEAR!"

THAT is how we all greeted one another when we met in the morning, and I think I need not say how fully confident I felt that the new year was going to begin in the most delightful fashion.

I glanced furtively at Colonel Clarence a good many times as we sat at breakfast, and it was good to note the look of quiet content in those eyes which had once been so sad when the face was at rest.

I gazed across the blue waters of the harbour—for they were blue to-day, and the sun shone warm and hot as though it were summer—and I wondered how Sister's face was looking, and whether she guessed who would put in an appearance this morning.

I knew that Colonel Clarence would not wait until the afternoon before paying his respects at The Hermitage, and I saw him intercept the glance that I was bending in the direction of Pinetree Creek; and when he saw that I had noticed this, he gave me a smile that did me good.

Digitized by Google

"Will eleven o'clock be too early for our visit?" asked he as we rose from the table; and I looked up with a flush and a smile as I answered,—

"Not a bit. I have often been earlier than that."

Of course I always paid a morning visit to mother before going out anywhere, and when I went to her this morning I found her smiling and joyful.

"I have heard all about it, dear," she said, "and I am so glad. Of course we cannot tell exactly what may happen. Old threads cannot always be caught up just as though they had never been snapped, and sometimes there is pain as well as pleasure in the meeting of those over whose heads many years have passed since they saw each other. But remember this, dear, that I give you leave to exercise your discretion; and if things seem going just as we hope, and if the colonel and Miss Lucas take pleasure in renewing the friendship once sundered so suddenly, I should like you to take Miss Lucas an invitation from me to come and be our guest here at once for a little while. That will be much better than for the colonel to be going backwards and forwards constantly: for Miss Lucas is not an old woman yet, and she is a very beautiful one; besides which it would be a very great pleasure to us all to have her here for a time."

I was very sure indeed of that, and thought the idea delightful. To have Sister actually staying with us would be the acme of happiness; and I had the feeling

Digitized by Google

that perhaps now she would come. If the cloud lifted from the horizon of her sky, why should she hide herself away in solitude any longer?

Roy was down at the boat some time before we could start, getting all taut and trim. I ran down to help him, and between us we settled what we would do. We would take the colonel up the creek, and I would lead him to the house through the garden. It would be ever so much nicer than being formal, and going in by the regular way. I believed Sister would like it better; and at any rate it was our own way of coming and going, and we meant to have things our own way that day. Roy would wait in the boat whilst I took the colonel up to the house, and then I would slip away and join him in a little sail up and down the harbour, after which we would call for the colonel, and arrange with Sister to come for her in the afternoon, if she would accept mother's invitation, which I sincerely hoped and believed she would.

The colonel joined us at the appointed time, punctual to the moment. His face was grave and quiet, but there was a wonderful light in his eyes; and when he was not conscious of it, I liked to look at him and picture the meeting that was coming so near. People might talk as they liked about the difficulty of renewing broken bonds; I had, somehow, a feeling that directly Colonel Clarence and Sister stood face to face, everything would be right again.

Digitized by Google

He asked no question till we were sailing up the creek, and then he gave a quick glance round and said,—

"I thought we landed at the ferry steps for The Hermitage!"

"Some people do; we don't," I answered quickly. "We have a way of our own for going there."

"But have I that privilege?" he asked, in momentary doubt; and I answered with a confident smile,—

"Oh yes, if you come with us."

I do not know if Colonel Clarence knew exactly the extent of our acquaintance with his past relations with Sister, but he must have seen that we knew something, and he did not seem to resent this in any way. He was quite silent as we brought the boat up against the garden wall, and I thought that his face was a little paler than usual as he stepped out and offered me his hand.

"You had better go first," he said, speaking very quietly, "and I will follow you."

I led the way through the shrubbery, which was thickly carpeted with fallen leaves. We made no sound save a little rustling as we trod; and soon I caught a glimpse of the house through the gaps in the evergreens.

She was there—she was out of doors, walking to and fro in the sunshine. She had her fur cloak round her shoulders, but her head was bare, and her beautiful golden hair shone in the clear brightness of the winter morning. I paused for a single moment to watch her. Was it my fancy, or was there something expectant in

Digitized by Google

her face and movements? Was there not an atmosphere of hope and brightness about her which was not due altogether to the cheerful sunlight or the crisp freshness of the air?

Next moment our presence was no longer a secret. Wuppy's sharp ears heard us, or his nose told him intruders were about. He ran forward barking joyously as he caught sight of me, but with a more suspicious challenge in his voice as he recognized the presence of a stranger. I caught him up in my arms and made a rush for Sister.

"A happy New Year!" I cried—"a happy New Year!" and dropping the dog, I flung my arms round Sister, who held me close in a long, warm clasp.

"Darling!" she said, and said nothing more; but I felt that her eyes had gone beyond me, and presently her clasp loosed itself, and I could turn round.

Colonel Clarence had come slowly forward; he was about six paces from us now, and Wuppy was making a great show of impeding his advance, rather astonished that nobody took any notice of his remonstrances and antics. But this was a moment when one had no thought to spare for the dog.

The colonel held out his hands, and that light in his eyes was wonderful to see.

"Magdalen!" he said.

"Edgar!" she replied.

They came close together—their hands met.

Digitized by Google

I caught up Wuppy again and hurried off without so much as one single backward glance. My eyes were dim, so that I stumbled as I ran. I tried to pretend that it was breathlessness which made me give those odd little sobs as I sped through the shrubbery path. I had planned to watch this meeting, to say something appropriate; to withdraw gracefully when I was certain everything was going to be right. But when the time came I could not. There was something too sacred and wonderful in this meeting. It was not for my eyes to see, nor for my ears to hear. I wanted to get away as fast as I could, and I almost tumbled into the boat where Roy was waiting for me, half laughing and half crying.

Roy pushed off without a word, and Wuppy showed great interest in my agitation, pushing his cold nose into my face and examining it all over, a deep solemnity of expression upon his own.

"Well, is it all right?" asked Roy presently, as the boat leaped over the shining waves of the bay.

"Oh yes, I am quite sure of that. But I couldn't stay to see. I ran away as hard as I could pelt when once they had spoken to each other."

"I thought you would," answered Roy, with a smile; "and I suppose it was about the best thing to be done under the circumstances."

It was a lovely morning, one of those almost summer-like days which down on the south coast we sometimes get even in the heart of the winter.

Digitized by Google

All nature seemed to be rejoicing with us in our joy. I was so full of excitement and anticipation that nothing but active movement could have satisfied me. We put up all the sail we could, and tore over the water like sea-birds on the wing; and as we flew over the lightly-crested waves, we talked of Sister and of the probable result of this meeting.

"It generally means that people marry and go away and get humdrum," Roy remarked, with a little laugh. "They may be very happy themselves, but they are not quite so interesting to the rest of the world as when they were surrounded with a halo of romance."

"Sister would never get humdrum," I answered, a little indignantly; "and she would always be interesting whatever she did. But I suppose if they marry they will go away!" and I heaved a sigh, for it seemed to me just then as though life would be very flat without Sister at The Hermitage.

"I suppose so too. But perhaps they will come and stay with us sometimes; and we shall always have them for our friends."

I grew rather reflective after that. It seemed as though my little bit of work were going to be taken from me very quickly. I had never quite forgotten what Aunt Joan had said to me—that perhaps it had been given to me to try to bring a little sunshine into Sister's shadowed life. I never felt as though I had done anything—it was she who had made mine more

Digitized by Google

interesting in so many ways; but, anyhow, fortune had been kind in helping us, amongst ourselves, to get this mystery cleared up and put right. But then, if I had no longer Sister to take a central place in my thoughts, what should I get for the next object?

Perhaps I would ask Hilda to let me help her with her various objects of interest in the place. She would want somebody to take her place when she had gone. And then I suddenly found myself colouring with vexation and irritation. I could not get Nigel's words out of my head. I did not want to help him; I wanted only to help Hilda. But perhaps he would think I meant to take his advice, and be useful to him if I offered. That would be unendurable! Nigel might be a different sort of man from the pictures I had drawn of him in my fancy; but I was not going to let him dictate to me, or dominate my life in any way. For a moment the sunshine and brightness of the day were clouded over. I wished I had not thought of Nigel and his strange words last night. He had no business to talk about loving me. I don't believe he ever loved anybody in his life—the cold-blooded, cautious creature!

"What is the matter, Cissy?" asked Roy suddenly; "you look as grumpy as an old crab!"

I took Wuppy's head between my hands and pressed my face down upon it. I half wanted to tell Roy, and half did not. I thought he might think I was unreasonable and foolish.

Digitized by Google

"I was only thinking of something disagreeable," I answered, stealing a glance at him through my eyelashes.

"Well, I wish you wouldn't, then, unless you want to talk it out. It makes you bad company."

"I'm sorry," I answered; "I'll try not to think about it any more. It was only Nigel."

Roy gave me a quick, searching glance.

"Is Nigel the nasty thing, then?"

"He can be sometimes. He was last night, for instance."

"What did he do—or say?"

"Oh, I can't exactly tell you; but he tried to be sentimental. Just fancy that—with Nigel!"

"I can't fancy it—I was going to say I don't believe it. Sentiment isn't Nigel's form at all. But what did you do?"

"I scuttled out as fast as I could. I didn't know what was coming next."

Roy showed his teeth in a silent laugh. I was engrossed in caressing Wuppy, who lay on my lap with a lordly air, as though the whole world belonged to him.

"Well," said Roy at length, "supposing such a thing should happen as that Nigel should be 'sentimental' again; suppose you don't scuttle away, but stay and hear what he has to say."

I lifted Wuppy up and put my face close to his, holding him like a baby. I felt my cheeks were burning, and I could hide one against him.

Digitized by Google

"You like Nigel so much better than I do," I said slowly.

"Perhaps I know him a bit better," answered Roy.

"I like him better than I did," I admitted, trying to be magnanimous; "he isn't quite such a prig as he was once."

"He's not the least bit of a prig in any way," Roy answered, rather hotly. "I don't say he didn't once go through a little phase of it. Most clever fellows do till they get cured by experience. But he's as fine a fellow at heart as anybody need wish to see. People say you know a man by his friends. Look at Nigel's! Well, I suppose you don't know very many, but if you did you would rate him differently."

"Don't be cross with me, Roy," I pleaded; "I'll try to like him if I can."

And there came over me a feeling that, if once I did try, I should not find the task such a very difficult one after all.

However, nothing could keep our thoughts long away from The Hermitage and what might be going on there. We let the stipulated hour pass by and a pretty wide margin, and then we drove the boat up the creek once more, and I went back through the garden to say that we had returned to take the colonel home to lunch.

I saw them very quickly, walking up and down in the sunshine. I do not even know whether they had been into the house at all. Sister's hand was on his

Digitized by Google

"Sister's hand was on his arm."

Page 372.

Digitized by Google

Digitized by Google

arm, her sweet face was often turned up towards him; his head was bent, and his eyes were fixed almost the whole time upon her face. He seemed unable to turn them away; and I did not wonder, for Sister looked so lovely, with that flush of happiness on her cheek, and that soft, radiant light in her eyes, that if I had not felt it a sort of spying upon them, I should have liked to stand and watch them for an hour.

Wuppy, however, had no such desire, and he ran forward to announce my arrival, and express his surprise and disapproval of the stranger in his garden.

The colonel stooped to make friends with the dog—no very difficult end to achieve, as Wuppy, if peppery, was very placable and fond of notice and petting—whilst I went straight up to Sister, who put her arms about me again and kissed me, regardless of the close proximity of Colonel Clarence.

"Darling!" she said softly.

Then I tendered mother's invitation, backed by earnest coaxing from myself. It was evidently quite a new and a rather startling suggestion to Sister; but after a little hesitation she sent a loving message of thanks back to mother, and said she would be ready that same afternoon if we would come for her.

Colonel Clarence's face was a sight to see when he understood what was passing between us; and as he held out his hand and took hold of hers, with an air of lover-like protection that did one good to see, he said,—

Digitized by Google

"Then it is not good-bye, Magdalen; I shall see you again to-day?"

She made a little gesture of the head, but did not speak; though the smile in her eyes was answer enough.

"You will bring Wuppy!" I said, turning to look back; and at the sound of his name he uttered a little sharp, short bark, as much as to say he would take very good care he was not left behind.

The colonel did not talk much as we sailed back over the blue water, but there was upon his face a look of deep and measureless content which was good to see. When he handed me out at our own steps, he slightly pressed my hand, and said,—

"Thank you."

I felt then just as I had done when Sister said "Darling!" It was as though they were thanking me for something; and I knew I had done so very, very little. But I was as happy as it was possible to be.

We went over and fetched Sister that same afternoon; and just as it was growing dusk I had her safe in the room adjoining mine, and was standing beside her in the glow of the fire, hugging her very, very tight.

"Sister darling, is it all right—is all the cloud gone?" I whispered.

"Every single little bit, darling!" she answered, in a voice which sounded as though there were tears not far away, but tears of pure happiness; "and oh, I think now that it was worth waiting for, I do indeed!"

Digitized by Google

"But you have lost so many years!" I said; for to me the thought of those long, long years of waiting seemed dreadful.

Sister stood with one arm around me, gazing into the fire. I watched the play of light and shadow upon her sweet face. I knew that she was thinking deeply.

"Yes," she answered thoughtfully; "that is what Edgar says. We have lost all those years which we might have spent together. But I have told him he must not think of that. Perhaps he would have been tired of me by this time, if he had had me then."

"Sister!"

"Little girl, you need not be so indignant. I have been thinking it over all these hours. I begin to see what a very spoiled child I was when all that happened. I had had such an easy life always—with everything that I wanted, petted and spoiled by every one. I was not fitted at all to be the wife of a poor man. I am not sure that I was fit to be any man's wife. I had to go through a hard school; but I think, perhaps, that was the best thing that could happen to me. I wanted every bit of the schooling I got—I can see it all now."

"I don't believe it a bit!" I answered stoutly.

Sister gave me one of her sweet kisses, but she shook her head and smiled.

"Ah, you are such a baby! You don't understand! But when Edward Clarence came yesterday and told me

Digitized by Google

everything, I could not tell him he had been altogether wrong. Yes, wrong in what he did—nothing can ever excuse deceit and falsehood; but he was not wrong in thinking that I was not fitted for the rough-and-tumble life of an officer's wife, when neither Edgar nor I had any private means to speak of, and our circumstances had quite changed. We were young, and very much in love. We should have married on these most uncertain prospects, I am sure; but it might not have been for our happiness. I can see that now. I can see our own unfitness—mine to meet the battle of life, his to see me suffer in any way through my marriage. It was not hard to forgive the sin that separated us. Nothing was hard since I knew that he had been faithful all through."

"Well, I don't think I could have forgiven!" I said quickly.

Sister turned and gave me a long, steadfast look.

"Ah, you will learn how easy that is by-and-by, little girl, when you come to know what the bitterness of repentance is."

I clung to Sister then, feeling how much she had learned of the lessons of life, which were only now becoming more than a name to me. It seemed to me that all the nicest people in the world had had trouble and sorrow to bear. I wondered if I should ever be worth anything, having known nothing but sunshine and pleasure!

Then I took Sister downstairs. Mother was in the

Digitized by Google

drawing-room to-night, and welcomed her most cordially and sweetly. They talked a little together before the rest assembled; but in a little while one after the other dropped in for tea, till we were quite a party.

I poured out, and Roy waited on me; but my eyes were never far away from the pair beside mother's couch. Colonel Clarence devoted himself to both the ladies, and Sister talked more to mother than to him; but I tried to catch from time to time the glance which passed between them, and I knew that they were both as happy as it was possible for two people to be.

It was a most delightful idea of mother's having the lovers to stay at Wyverne Court. It enabled them to be together without trouble or remark, and it was the most natural and easy way of introducing Miss Lucas to our various friends and acquaintances, without the needless difficulty of their having to make calls and explanations at The Hermitage.

I almost admired the way in which Lady Lavender rose to the occasion when she was first confronted with Sister in our drawing-room.

She greeted her with a cordiality and *empressement* which were quite overwhelming in their thoroughness; and holding Sister's hand between both of hers, she said,—

"I had heard that you were regaining strength, and would not be a prisoner much longer; but I did not really know that callers might pay their respects at The

Digitized by Google

Hermitage till I saw you at the ball the other night; and since then we have been in such a rush, and the weather has so often been unfavourable, that I have not been able to get across to you. But I am delighted to make your acquaintance in this way, and I shall hope to call as soon as ever you return home again."

"Thank you," answered Sister, with her quiet, gentle dignity. "I came here for quiet and rest, and I have been grateful to people for letting me alone so far. But I am quite well again now, and I shall be very pleased to see my friends at The Hermitage."

"A very charming person, certainly," I heard Lady Lavender remark later on to Aunt Joan. "And what a romantic thing that she and Colonel Clarence should have been on the verge of an engagement years ago, and have been faithful to the memory of each other all these years that he has been away from the country!"

So by this I knew that Lady Lavender had only heard a vague and modified account of what had really occurred; and by-and-by, rather to our relief and decidedly to our amusement, we found that she was spreading abroad the tale in her own fashion, and that Mr. Clarence was regarded as the good angel of the piece, who had discovered at last the whereabouts of the lady, and had brought the two together!

I could not help feeling rather excited when first Mr. Clarence came to our house after Sister's arrival there. They had not met since the day when he had gone with

Digitized by Google

Aunt Joan to make his confession, and I wondered how long it would be before they met again.

When one day towards dusk he was ushered in, just after the lamps and tea had been brought, I felt my heart beating rather fast, and I saw that Sister's colour flushed up quickly.

Colonel Clarence was not present. He and the boys were out in the boat, and had not come back; but there were a few callers in the room, and there was rather a hubbub of talk going on.

He shook hands with us all, bowed to the strangers when his name was mentioned, and then I heard Sister speak in her low, clear tones.

"There is a chair here, Edward," she said; "come and sit down and tell me all about yourself. I have not half heard what you have been doing of late years."

The talk rose again in a gentle stream. I could no longer hear Sister's voice; but I saw that she and Mr. Clarence were talking together like old friends, and I knew that all was now forgotten and forgiven. The strained, pained look had vanished from his face. So also had that indefinable expression which had spoiled it before for so many of us. I felt that now I could trust this man, even though I knew the secret of his past sin. Before I knew it I had always felt an odd sort of dislike. But if he had sinned deeply, he had repented bitterly, and those whom he had injured had forgiven him fully and freely.

Digitized by Google

And although I did not put the thought into words, I felt that he looked like a man who has won the forgiveness not only of man, but also of God.

"What a romantic story about Miss Lucas and Colonel Clarence!" said one of our youthful callers, drawing close to me. "How very beautiful she is! and he is such a fine, soldierly man. I saw them out together the other day, and all the old people in the place were saying what a handsome couple they made. And that is his cousin who is engaged to Amy, and who brought them together again. He is very handsome too. I wonder if they will make a double wedding of it, as the brides live so near together!"

"I hardly think so," I answered, almost laughing. "But we shall see."

Digitized by Google

CHAPTER XIX.

SPRING DAYS.

DID ever sun shine as brightly through the short winter days as during the weeks which followed that bright New-Year's Day?

Did ever spring seem to burst so early upon the world of the south as it did that year, when the honeysuckle began to put out tender green leaves before January was out, and primroses were seen peeping shyly through their circling leaves as soon as February had come?

What a happy time it was for me! I can remember it as though it were yesterday.

It seemed as though the sunshine had stolen into Sister's heart and was reflected in her face. It was the same face I had known from the first—sweet and calm and beautiful; and yet now there was a look upon it which seemed to glorify it (that is what I used to think as I looked at her in those days). She seemed transfigured, and yet I could not say wherein the change lay; but it made me happy—oh, so happy!—and I knew that she was happy too.

Digitized by Google

She would tell me so in her own sweet way almost every day. She would often put her arms closely about me, and say "Darling!" in the voice I loved to hear; and Wuppy would come pushing his nose between us, paddling upon us with his paws, anxious not to be "out of it" when there was any petting going. I had never cared to be petted before, except a little by mother; but I loved to feel Sister's arms about me, and hear her soft voice speaking in sweet and caressing accents. I think, perhaps, I wanted just such a softening influence in my life. At any rate Roy used to tell me I was "improving"—if his brotherly remarks had any truth in them; and certainly I had more patience in some ways than I used to have, and things which once had fretted and annoyed me did not trouble me any more.

Everybody loved Sister so! That was one of my great pleasures. She had hardly been three days in the house before mother and Aunt Joan were calling her Magdalen; and even Garth, who was generally a good while in "taking" to a stranger, fell into our fashion of saying "Sister" in the most natural way.

And soon things began to be so interesting; for plans were made which I had never thought of before, and which to me were wholly enchanting.

Of course there are two sides to every question, and Garth did not view the matter quite as I did. It was from him that I first heard the news.

"It may make a step in the regiment if they don't

Digitized by Google

fill up from outside," he remarked one day "But Clarence will be a tremendous loss to us."

"What do you mean, Garth?"

"Don't you know? Clarence is going to resign and beat his sword into a pruning-hook—or whatever the right phrase is. He is going to give up the army."

"Is he? I didn't know. Oh, I think I am glad! He will marry Sister very soon, I suppose?"

"Yes, so I presume. I think he feels he has waited long enough for his happiness. And, of course, married officers' wives do have a rather rough-and-tumble life of it. I can understand his feeling. Besides, it's quite true what he says. He is not likely to see active service again. He has been in a lot of foreign wars, and he has got an old wound which makes the chance of his being sent off again very remote. He has come into some property, and his future wife has some. As he says himself, with promotion so slow, it's only fair that some of the older men should clear out of the way when their fighting days are done, and they can afford to quit the service. Nobody who has seen all the campaigning he has done cares much for the round of barrack life in times of peace. There's a good deal to be said certainly on that side; but I shall miss him awfully. We shall never get such another colonel, I'm afraid."

Sister had gone back to The Hermitage by that time, and Wuppy with her; for he had now completely given himself away to her, and even the residence again

Digitized by Google

beneath the walls of his own home had not brought him to regard himself as a permanent inmate. He lorded it over everybody and everything whilst he was there, and set himself above Chips in a most amusing fashion. But all the same, as soon as he saw Sister's box carried down to the boat, he jumped in and curled himself up on the seat in the stern waiting for her; and not all my blandishments could lure him away from The Hermitage when he found that Sister was returning there to live.

But now the intercourse between the two houses was constant. We were across in the boat every day, and often twice in the day. Sister no longer shook her head and said "Some day," when we suggested taking her over to our house. Her visits to mother became of almost daily occurrence, and now that Aunt Joan had gone back to Hurst Royal, mother was always saying, if anything turned up which wanted talking over,—

"Oh, just go across, one of you, and ask Magdalen if she will come and see me."

One day in Fair Haven I heard news that greatly excited and disquieted me.

I immediately ran with the news to Roy, and we got out the boat at once, and sailed across to The Hermitage to ask Sister if she knew anything about the matter.

We found her pacing to and fro upon the terrace, which was her favourite haunt when the sun shone; and

Digitized by Google

we ran up eagerly, to the accompaniment of Wuppy's barks and gambols.

"Sister, have you heard? Old Winterfold at Fair Haven says he has been told that some gentleman is in treaty for The Hermitage and the land round, and is coming to live there himself!"

A sudden smile lighted up Sister's eyes. I saw it, and exclaimed quickly,—

"Then it isn't true, is it?"

"I believe it is quite true," she answered, still smiling.

"Oh, but, Sister, will you have to go if he buys it? Will the wretch turn you out?"

But Roy suddenly saw light, and burst out laughing; whilst Sister answered, with a little smile and blush,—

"I may be turned out for a little while, but I shall come back again soon, I think."

And almost in the same breath Roy exclaimed,—

"Don't be dense, Cissy: it's Colonel Clarence who is going to buy it, I am sure."

"Oh!" I cried, a great light breaking in upon me. "O Sister, darling Sister! is that really so?"

"Would you like it, little girl?" asked Sister, smiling, her hands upon my shoulders, her eyes looking straight into mine. "Don't you think you will get tired of having us as neighbours always?"

My answer was a hug that would not have disgraced

Digitized by Google

a grizzly bear; and when I had got breath again after it, I exclaimed eagerly,—

"O Sister, it is quite too delightful! Tell us all about it!"

"Then come indoors, and we will have a cosy time together, and you shall hear everything. Edgar was not certain till a few days ago that his offer would be accepted. The owner is abroad, and there was some delay in getting an answer; and we did not like to say anything to you till it was all settled."

"And is it all settled now?"

"So far that I think there will be no fear of the result. The owner has not found The Hermitage a very profitable investment latterly, and we think he is very glad to have got a reasonable offer for it. Edgar is to meet the agent to-day; when he comes back, we shall know how things stand."

It was with new interest that I looked round at the little quaint house as we stepped across the threshold.

"I always loved The Hermitage!" I cried. "Roy and I used to plan how we would come and live here; but this is better, for I don't think, somehow, that we should ever have carried out our plan. You are fond of the house, aren't you, Sister? you don't find it a little damp hole?"

"Some of the rooms are rather damp in winter, but a great deal can be done to remedy that when the place is our own. Edgar has had an architect over, and we

Digitized by Google

have settled what needs doing. A few hundreds spent upon it will make it everything that we need. We are not such very grand people, either of us, and the climate down here is delightful, and just suits me. That has been the great thing all along; and this was the place where we met each other after everything had been put right. We should love the house if it were only for that."

"And Colonel Clarence is going to leave the army?"

"Yes. I would have shared the life with him, but he will not hear of it; and for some reasons I am glad. He has served his country and his Queen with some of the best years of his life, and growing old in the service is not the happiest thing when the days of active campaigning are over. Besides, he will not be idle—that is not in him, I think. He has other ideas in his head, now that he has time and money at command."

"What sort of ideas?" I asked, with interest.

"He wants to join Lord Lavender in his undertakings. He has a great idea that there is much still to be done on the land before it can be called 'played out,' as people are so fond of saying. He is buying the farm and land on this side of the water; it belongs to The Hermitage property, you know, and has been empty since last Michaelmas twelvemonth. He is going to try here the same experiment as Lord Lavender is trying on your side. And I shall do all I can to help him. There are hundreds and thousands of competent labourers and

Digitized by Google

farm hands who are drifting year by year into the towns, where they slowly starve and lose all their value and training, just because they fail to get work upon the farms, so many of which are passing out of cultivation. It is these men that we shall try to rescue and bring back—set them to the sort of toil they were born to; give them a small but steady wage to start with, and possibly a share in the profits, if we succeed, as we hope to do when once the thing is started. People all over the country are crying out against the inferior quality of butter sold as fresh country nowadays. We are in a very remote corner of the world: that is against us, of course. But Lord Lavender has gone most carefully into the question of supply and demand, and he has good reason to believe that in Plymouth alone we could dispose of any amount of good sound fresh dairy and garden produce. He thinks that only the capital and the brains are wanted to start things to prove that there *is* money to be made out of land, if only those who cultivate it will put their best into their work, and not seek to be gentlefolk, where their fathers were only labouring farmers who worked with their own hands, rose with or before the sun, and brought up their sons and daughters to help them, instead of thinking of aping the neighbouring squires and setting up to be 'ladies and gentlemen!'" and Sister wound up with a little smile at the length of her own speech.

I had heard a good deal of talk upon this subject

Digitized by Google

recently, and although I had regarded it at first as just one of "Nigel's hobbies," I had begun of late to feel considerable interest in the matter, and to ask a good many questions of Roy about Nigel's farm. I was just a little vexed that he had never asked me to go and see it, now that there were men already at work there, and busy laying down wire netting and building poultry-houses and repairing barns. A nice old shepherd and his wife were living in the farmhouse, and the men all lived there too. She cooked for them and looked after the place, with a girl under her; and I had heard that it was quite a picturesque sight to see the big old kitchen at meal-times, with the great fire lighting it up, and the men and lads sitting round the table eating their bread and bacon.

On the Sunday following Christmas Day there had been a regular Christmas dinner provided for them by Nigel, and some of our party had gone to see them enjoy it, and had had a talk with them.

Just at that time I had been much, too much engrossed in other matters to take any sort of interest in Nigel's farm; but now that I knew Sister was thinking so much about it, I wished I had not been quite so indifferent.

What a lot we had to talk about and think about during the next days! Things were going at quite a lively rate. Colonel Clarence came back from the interview with the agent saying that it seemed as

Digitized by Google

though the negotiation would go through very easily and quickly. The title was good, the owner was anxious to sell, so the offer had been practically accepted from the first. Quite a little while afterwards the first instalment of the purchase-money was paid down, and then it was not long before we heard that workmen were to be put into the house to effect those repairs and alterations which the house required to make it thoroughly comfortable and habitable.

"And, mother dear," I cried coaxingly, "whilst they are doing up The Hermitage, you will ask Sister to come and stay with us, will you not?"

"I should like nothing better," answered mother readily, and it did not take much persuading before Sister consented to come. The colonel would still be at Watchet Bay with the regiment, for he was willing to continue at his post until his successor had been appointed; and both he and she would be able to superintend operations at The Hermitage, as well as to meet under the roof of Wyverne Court as often as circumstances permitted. The waters of the harbour would be no longer a hindrance to these meetings in stormy weather; and, for my part, I thought the arrangement a delightful one.

Sister was pleased to be on this side of the harbour; it enabled her to pay so many more visits to the hospital and the farm. It was already being discussed whether Nurse Lloyd should not be offered the post of

Digitized by Google

matron to the hospital. Sister said that she ought to go back to her nursing, now that she had quite recovered from the strain from which she had been suffering. She was too good a nurse to spend all her days in domestic service, and she was fully capable of the duties of superintending this little place. Nurse Bradley, who was growing old, would remain with Sister as housekeeper and personal attendant, and was already training a second girl to act as parlour-maid in the new establishment when it should be set up. It seemed to me that Sister's life was going to be filled with all manner of useful aims and purposes, and that she would shed sunshine upon the paths of very many as she went upon her way.

She taught me a great many things, and I used to go about with her very often; but I often felt a sort of heavy-heartedness in the thought that I had no part or lot in any of these matters.

Nigel came often to our house to talk with Miss Lucas, and he often asked if he might drive her across to the farm to show her what was being done there, and consult with her over some knotty point. She always assented, and sometimes gave me a swift, questioning look, as much as to ask if I were going too; but Nigel never extended his invitation to me. I had observed a very slight change in his manner towards me—so slight that I was almost vexed at taking any notice of it. He met me just as before, and nobody

Digitized by Google

but myself could possibly know that any change had come over him; but I was aware of it. He never told me any of those things which so quickly interested Sister, and which really interested me now. If he had any service he wanted done either at farm or hospital, he never asked it of me. If it were something that Hilda could not do from lack of time or from other cause, he would bring his request to Sister. Often and often I might be in the room, but he never looked my way. I would not admit even to myself that I was hurt by this; and yet as day by day and week by week went on and the same thing continued, I felt as though I were being left out of everything, and of no use at all in the world.

Once Sister said to me when she was starting off for the farm with Roy,—

"Why do you never come, little girl?"

And I answered with something like petulance, to cover my real feelings,—

"Nigel never asks me. It is his place. I am not going if he does not want me. I daresay he will be there himself."

Sister looked at me with an expression in her eyes which I could not quite fathom.

"Perhaps 'Nigel' thinks you do not want to come."

"Well, he could at least ask me, and see."

"Has he never asked you yet?"

At that question my cheeks suddenly flamed, and I

Digitized by Google

did not know what to reply. I could hardly say with truth that I had never been asked to help.

Sister smiled, and made one of her telling little gestures with hand and head, her eyes smiling all the while.

"I think, little girl, you will have to be rather nicer to 'Nigel' before he will like to ask anything of you. Be a wise child, and don't throw away the substance for the shadow, as so many young things do."

My cheeks flamed. I never minded one bit what Sister said to me, but I wondered if she knew how very difficult I had made it for myself to be nice to Nigel. If only I could get him and his affairs out of my head, I should be quite happy. But somehow that was just what I could not do. Nigel was always about; his plans and schemes were being constantly discussed. Hilda, Sister, the colonel, even mother, were always talking of them. Everybody seemed more or less busy over them; only I had nothing to do, and was of no use to anybody. If it had not been for Sister's including me in her hospital visits, and giving me little hints about this person and the other, and how I could help them, I should have felt like a drone in a hive of bees. As it was she saved me from that; but I used to feel that when she had once married, and was not always at hand, I should relapse into my old idleness, and find nothing to do for anybody.

But perhaps before Hilda was married she would put me in the way of doing some of her work. That was

Digitized by Google

the thought that sometimes came into my head; then again I drew back into myself, declaring it would be impossible, and ending up by feeling a sort of self-dissatisfaction and heart-heaviness which was quite new to me, and a very unwelcome sensation.

For the most part, however, I had plenty to think about—plenty of pleasant things too.

Amy's wedding was getting very near, and I was to be one of the bridesmaids. It was to be a very grand affair, and would take place early in April, immediately after Easter, which fell unusually early that year. Mr. Clarence was away for the most part, making ready his house for his future bride; but he paid visits to Fair Haven every now and then, and each time that he came we liked him better. All the appearance of superciliousness and *hauteur* which we had noticed and criticized at first had disappeared. I think that sincere repentance of a sin makes a man a very different creature from what he has been before. I never knew exactly how far Mr. Clarence was aware of our knowledge of his secret. Perhaps he did not quite know how much had leaked out, nor to whom, but at least he knew that we all of us had some inkling of a mystery, and one perhaps not very creditable to him. So I think it must have required a good deal of courage for him to come amongst us as he did; and that it showed a real humility that he did not shirk these visits, and that he met us all so frankly and cordially.

Digitized by Google

It was very interesting watching Amy's trousseau arrive, and all the presents; and it was even more interesting to see how The Hermitage was being done up, and made a most delightful place of abode. Sister had a large number of beautiful things from her old home stored away in the north; for when her life was torn up by the roots, and she decided to have no fixed home of her own for the time being, she housed all those heirlooms and personal effects which she could not bear to part with. A few she had always kept with her, just enough to adorn a few rooms; but the bulk had remained where they had been stored, and even when she came to The Hermitage for a year or more, she had not sent for them. She had not thought it worth while, when she might only be a bird of passage.

But now they began to arrive, and a delightful time we had. The colonel had excellent taste too, and sent down beautiful carpets and hangings, and quaint solid old furniture from London, just suited to the picturesque old house. Some things had been bought over from the last owner; and altogether before very long the house was made perfectly charming.

The garden, too, was wonderfully improved. Aunt Joan had spent a whole week with us, in order to advise as to the thinning out of the shrubberies, the gravelling and turfing, clipping and edging, and the planting of new trees and shrubs and herbaceous flowers. She had brought great baskets full of roots and bulbs

Digitized by Google

and choice seedlings from the gardens at Hurst Royal, and when once she had set to work with a gang of men under her, it was wonderful what was achieved.

The setting in order of The Hermitage gardens was the first work found for the new men, who were to settle upon the farm; and Aunt Joan took their measure in a marvellous way as they worked under her, and told Sister in a few words just what each one was most capable of doing. She talked to them, too, and learned what they had done in the past; and the colonel afterwards said that she had given invaluable advice, and he only wished Hurst Royal was not so far away.

"My home-farm has always paid," Aunt Joan told him, whilst they were discussing the question; "but remember, I always superintend everything myself. There isn't a thing upon the place I couldn't do myself if I were put to it, from digging the ground to milking the cows and churning the butter. I've taken a spade many a time from a new hand, and showed him how to trench, and stood over him till he has got into the knack of it. Many are the garden boys I have taught how to handle a broom. I am old-fashioned enough not to think any kind of work degrading. People may laugh; much I care for that! If you are to be mistress of your house and land in these days, you must know how to do everybody's work, from the highest to the lowest, and be able to show them how at a pinch."

Colonel Clarence bent his head in assent.

Digitized by Google

"You are quite right, Lady Joan," he said; "it is the same with everything. No man is fit, in my opinion, to be a commanding officer who does not know every detail of a private's work. I only wish our present system consisted of less book cram and a great deal more good, hard, practical work! We don't want book-worms to lead our men in battle; we want *men!*"

So Colonel Clarence and Aunt Joan were fast friends from that day forward, and she went over every detail of the proposed farm with him and Nigel, astonishing them both by the accuracy of her knowledge and by her practical shrewdness.

"You've got a lot to learn yet," she said to the colonel, with perfect frankness, "and you'll probably make some blunders—as I did at starting; but the secret of everything is to be your own head-man, and let nothing go on that you don't know the ins and outs of from first to last. You've got a wife who knows everything as to management within doors; you take the outdoor staff into your hands, and between you you will score a success."

"I hope we shall," said the colonel, with a smile. "We mean to, at least."

In this interesting way the weeks of early spring flew by, and if I did not *do* a great deal in that time, I think I may say I learned a great deal.

Then came Amy's wedding, which was a very grand affair, as you may guess; for Fair Haven was adorned

Digitized by Google

with flags and bunting from the harbour, where all the fishing-boats were decorated from stem to stern, right up to the church itself, which was a mass of gold and blue. The children had scoured the woods and copses for miles round, and had brought in late daffodils and primroses and early bluebells; and the cottagers had given the spoils of their gardens: so that evergreen arches and masses of flowers were to be seen at every turn, as well as fluttering flags and devices of all sorts.

It was a walking wedding, too—quite the prettiest sort of wedding to have, I think, when the distance is short, the road unsuited to carriages (as ours were), and the sun shines brightly overhead.

We had perhaps five hundred yards to walk up the steep path to the church—the carriage road would have been half a mile or more—and the whole way was lined with familiar, friendly faces, with children in holiday attire, old men in fishing gear, and each person ready with a posy of flowers to throw beneath the feet of bride and bridegroom upon their return.

Nigel gave the bride away, and Amy looked very sweet and pretty in her trailing robes and soft white veil.

Hilda and I walked next after her, and then some cousins, mostly children, very prettily dressed, and carrying baskets of flowers. Mother had been brought up to the church in her invalid chair, and Sister stood beside

Digitized by Google

her at the back of the church, but in the centre aisle, so that they could see everything that passed.

Mother was pleased at the pretty sight of the village street with its flowers and arches. The village was all *en fête*, and after bride and bridegroom had gone away in the afternoon, there was a great tea given to all the fisher folk in the gardens of Eagle's Crag, and we all waited on them, and laughed over their speeches and health-drinking, and made merry in a light-hearted way.

Sister stayed at home to take care of mother, so I was free to enjoy myself up here. I could not help noticing how all the people spoke to Nigel and looked at him, nor could I fail to overhear the remarks of the women, who would look after him as he passed by, and say one to the other,—

"He's a good sort, and no mistake. There be none like him this side the Land's End. Twidden be natt'ral like not he wasn' here tu see it all. Aw ess, he's a good 'un that 'er be. Happen he'll be havin' a wife of his own one of these days. She wad be a rare lucky maid tu get such a good husband. 'Tisn't every maid as can du so well for herself."

I rather marvelled to hear all this, for I did not know that Nigel made much of the people at Fair Haven. He had a good deal of property there, but I did not often see him going about in the place. I wondered how it was he had so won the hearts of the

Digitized by Google

old folk. But perhaps they were wiser than I. I was beginning to think there had been some folly and some prejudice about me in the past, and I wondered if I should ever see more clearly.

It was a very different sort of wedding when Sister, a few weeks later, stood with Colonel Clarence at the altar of our little church, and repeated the vows that made them man and wife.

There were no flags and arches, no fluttering white draperies and masses of flowers.

"I am too old for a white wedding, darling," she had said, when I urged white satin and orange blossom upon her. "I am getting an old woman now, and we want everything as quiet as possible."

But if ever bride looked lovelier than Sister did in her soft pearl-grey silk, with the little white rosebuds nestling at her throat, I should be glad to see one. I was her only bridesmaid, and Garth had requested the honour of being permitted to give her away. Aunt Joan had come up from Hurst Royal to see the wedding, and she and mother were at the back of the church.

Quiet as was the ceremony, and early as was the hour, there were plenty of spectators; for Sister was widely beloved on both sides of the water now, and there was not a person in the church that day who was not glad to know that she was not going away for any time, and that in a few weeks she and her husband

Digitized by Google

would be living in The Hermitage a happy, peaceful life together, useful to those about them, cloudless in their own happiness.

I at least knew this, if others did not; and though the tears stood in my eyes as I kissed Sister again and again before she got into the carriage that was to take her straight to the train at Queensbridge, I was very happy in thinking that she was soon to come back to live amongst us; and I was made happier still by the whisper which accompanied her last kiss,—

"Darling, I sometimes feel as though I owed it all to you!"

Digitized by Google

CHAPTER XX.

THE LAST.

I SUPPOSE the story of "Sister" ends properly with her marriage with Colonel Clarence; but I feel disposed to add one more chapter to my tale.

There are a few more things I should like to tell about before I turn my last page.

It was two days after Sister's wedding, and I was feeling life a little flat, as we sometimes do when a long-looked-for event has passed over our heads. Roy and I were sitting on the terrace close above the sea. The waves were lapping gently, and the glow of sunset was flushing the world, and making everything exquisitely lovely. I was wondering whether Sister was seeing anything as beautiful where she was, and wishing that she would come back, when Roy suddenly spoke.

"Cissy."

"Yes, Roy."

I spoke carelessly at first; but when I raised my eyes to his face, I saw something there which arrested my

Digitized by Google

attention. Roy was looking like a man with a purpose, and he seemed to be thinking deeply. I was interested at once.

"What is it?" I asked quickly.

"I wanted to tell you something—about myself," he answered.

Instantly I was all attention. What could Roy have to tell me about himself? Surely he had not fallen in love! There was nobody, so far as I saw, for whom he had had a chance of caring; but of late there had been so much of that sort of thing going on, that perhaps it was natural my first thoughts should turn in that direction.

"Go on, Roy; what is it?"

"I have been thinking a great deal lately, Cissy, about what I should do with my life. I think I have decided now."

"O Roy, what?"

"I intend to be a clergyman," he answered gravely.

I was silent, trying to take in the full meaning of these words. Roy and I had indulged many day-dreams together, had built and inhabited many airy castles, had planned all sorts of possible and impossible adventures to be taken in company. But I do not remember that we had ever spoken of such a career as this.

"Are you disappointed, Cissy?" asked Roy.

"I don't know. It has come so suddenly. I don't

Digitized by Google

seem quite to take it in. You have not talked about it before."

"No; but I have thought a great deal."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"You have had so many other things to think about lately," he answered, with something like a note of apology in his voice; "but I always meant to directly we were alone together again."

I put out my hand and laid it on Roy's in token that the old familiar comradeship was strong between us still.

"Have I seemed to neglect you lately, Roy dear?"

"Oh no; it was natural you should want to be with Sister. She was going so soon, and there were so many things to think about and to do. It was very delightful having her in the house. But, of course, we couldn't be always alone together as we are sometimes."

"And you have been thinking about this—since when?"

"I hardly know. A good while now. I talked it over with Hawke at Christmas—at least I talked to him about coming back to Oxford, and living out of college and reading divinity and other things. When you are with Hawke, he makes you feel that there are responsibilities given to every man—that we shall all have to answer one day for our lives and how we have spent them. I don't want to have to say of mine, 'I had

Digitized by Google

a very pleasant, easy time, and enjoyed myself very much; but nobody has been much the better for my having lived and died.'"

"O Roy!"

"Well, you know what I mean. I have seen something of Hawke's work in Oxford, and I know how many men can already say of him that, under God, he has saved them from terrible sloughs of disbelief and vice. Is not that a record worth having? Is it not something when every man brought into contact with him can say he is the better for having known him? That is something worth living for. I am not Hawke. I have not his gifts—I have not his talents; but he would be the first to say that talent has nothing to do with the matter, although every talent should be consecrated and put to some lasting use. I don't find it easy to talk about these things even to you, Cissy; but we always understand each other. May I try to tell you some of the things he said to me when I was asking counsel of him?"

"Do, Roy," I answered earnestly, drawing nearer to him and putting his arm about my neck as we sat together upon the low wall.

"I was talking to him about things, about myself. I felt so good-for-nothing—as though it were almost audacity even to present myself for any holy office. Then Hawke suddenly blazed up. I don't know exactly if you have ever seen him do that. It is as if some

Digitized by Google

fire kindled within; as though a power came upon him. It takes your breath when it happens. The words he speaks seem graven on your heart. I cannot repeat them verbatim, but I shall never forget their substance."

"Tell me, Roy!"

"He said that, if we begin looking at ourselves, looking into our own hearts, seeking for any good thing in our corrupt human nature, or seeking by exercises, meditations, mortifications of the flesh to *raise ourselves* higher (as is so much the teaching in many parts of the Church), we either despair, and fall into dreary despondency, or become unconsciously puffed up by thinking that we are growing in holiness through our self-imposed systems. That is not the Lord's way, he said; and there came a fire into his eyes as he spoke. He has given us only one way, and that is to look always and only to Him; to take Him at His word; to take hold of His promise that He is in us and we in Him; to believe, not in a half-hearted, despondent fashion, but with our whole heart and might, that 'he who loveth doth not commit sin,' and in the power of that promise, in the assurance that the Lord will triumph in us, to go forward fearlessly. Inasmuch as we believe that, inasmuch as we take hold upon that promise, inasmuch as we live the new life which is given us at baptism, and is fed and nourished in us by the sacraments, and ordinances, and ministries given to the Church for the perfecting of the saints, in that measure

Digitized by Google

we shall triumph over sin and go on to perfection. But if, instead of looking to Him and believing that He fights the battle in us, that He wins the victory, that we are in Him and He in us; if instead of this we look upon Him as outside of us, and content ourselves with asking His help as though He were far away, and are always looking into our own hearts, and thinking to find good things there—oh, I wish I could make it clear as he did—but that is the way to court failure. We have the Lord's promise to be with us and in us. We have got to take hold of that promise until it is a living reality, not a mere formula of words neither comprehended nor altogether believed. Do you understand me, Cissy?"

"I don't know," I answered, rather awed. "It sounds beautiful and grand; but it is a very big thing to grasp at all at once."

"That is what I said; but Hawke would not have it. He said it was the essence of our baptismal standing—the only thing which could give one courage to face the awful perils and problems of the day. If we thought to conquer by our own efforts, even with help from above, we might well be crushed at the thought of the battle. But if we really believe and hold fast to the promise that Christ is in us and with us, and that it is His life we are living, His strength which is given us; that we are one with Him and He with us—then we cannot doubt, we cannot fear; there is nothing for it

Digitized by Google

but to go straight forward. We cannot do these things, but He can; and there will come a day when He will come again and take the power and reign. Meantime He uses us, and we in His name and at His bidding go forward. 'There is One Holy, even One Lord Jesus Christ; in whom are we to the glory of God the Father.'"

Roy spoke the last words in a very low voice. I turned my head and looked at him; there was an expression upon his face which was very beautiful.

"Is that in the Bible, Roy?"

"The substance, not the exact words. Those Hawke quoted to me from some liturgy; but they seem to embody the whole idea. We can of ourselves never attain holiness, but inasmuch as there is One Holy—the Lord Jesus Christ—and as we are in Him to the glory of God the Father, we may trust and believe that He will, by us, further the righteous purposes of God upon this earth, if we will give ourselves wholly up to Him."

We sat silent a very long while after that, then I turned my face to Roy and kissed him. My cheeks were wet.

"What is the matter, little sister?" he asked. "You are not vexed with me?"

"Oh no, no, no!" I answered, with a little sob in my voice. "I was only thinking how I wished that I were a man, and could work with you."

Digitized by Google

Roy's arm was pressed closer round me as he said,—

"If your work had been man's work, Cissy, you would have been made a man."

It was such a gentle rebuke, if rebuke it were, that I smiled upon hearing it.

"But there never seems any work for me to do, Roy. Other people find it; but I seem to have nothing."

"I don't quite believe that, even in the present," he answered, "and work always comes to those who really want it."

"Perhaps when Sister gets back—" I began; but Roy was smiling, and I stopped short.

"We shall see," he answered. "There does not seem to me any such great lack of opportunity even without Sister. Do you know it was partly what I learned from Nigel's undertakings that strengthened the vague wish and purpose stirring within me."

"What do you mean?"

"Why, the very talking with these poor creatures he rescues from the slums of the towns, hearing of the grinding misery of such lives, picturing the thousands who live always amid such surroundings, such wretchedness, such ignorance—that was enough to fire me with a longing to do something for the multitudes left behind. I have not wealth like Nigel. I cannot attempt the sort of work he does. But I have a small competence—enough to keep me in comfort and leave me a margin for others, and I have youth and energy, and my

Digitized by Google

life before me. I can afford to go where the need is sorest—never mind whether I make anything or not. The labourer may be worthy of his hire; but in these days, when the mass of human misery and ignorance is so great, there is work and to spare for any who can afford to give their lives to it. I am going to talk it all over with mother; and if she approves, I shall go back to Oxford in October, and read and study under Hawke, and then I shall try for a degree in divinity, and present myself to the bishop in due course for ordination."

"And then, if you get a curacy somewhere, and mother can spare me," I cried eagerly, "I will come and keep house for you—and you will find me some work to do!"

He smiled a little as he answered,—

"I think your life's work will have come to you, Cissy, long before that time has arrived."

I felt my cheek flush, but I made no answer. I was not sure that I knew what Roy meant, but somehow I could not answer.

I was in a rather unsettled state during those bright days of early summer—restless, dissatisfied, wondering what was the matter, and why I could not be light-hearted and merry as of old.

I know the reason very well now, and perhaps I have partially betrayed it; but, honestly, I did not know then. I wanted work to occupy my mind, but some-

Digitized by Google

how I never seemed to ask for it in the right quarter. I felt a certain shy pride in suggesting to Hilda that she should let me help her. I was afraid Nigel would think I was meditating offering to take her place after she was married, and the very idea of such a thing made me feel hot all over.

I did not see so much of Hilda as usual during these weeks. Lady Lavender was away visiting her sister in Florence; and they had gone up to the hills together, and were enjoying themselves very much. Nigel and Hilda were alone at Eagle's Crag, with an occasional visit from Tom, who was at a crammer's. I never knew when I should find Nigel there, and I had grown to feel very shy and uncomfortable in his presence. He treated me with a little more ceremony than he had once done, but the old easy sense of intimacy had passed away. I was always hearing things which gave me new ideas of his powers and high principle, but I very seldom did more than exchange a greeting or a few trivial words with him. The funny part of it was that the less I saw of him the more he was in my thoughts. I was quite glad when Sister came back, that I might have another object of daily interest. Fancy being reduced to think every day whether in the course of my rambles I might meet Nigel or not, and whether he would stop and speak to me! Things must be getting to a pretty dull pass at Fair Haven!

It was delightful to have Sister settled at The Her-

Digitized by Google

mitage, but of course it was not quite what it used to be in the old days. Colonel Clarence was one of the nicest of men, and he soon fell into Sister's way of calling me "little girl," or Cissy, and making something of a pet of me. But all the same for that, The Hermitage was changed. Sister was no longer alone, always disengaged and ready for a visit. She had grown strong now—she had her own duties and occupations; and indeed she and her husband were preparing to lead a very full and busy if a rather quiet life. I was by no means sure of finding her at home if I went. She might be away at the farm, or out upon social duties. In the mornings she was busy with household matters; for she had her husband's comforts to think of now, and the wheels of domestic management ran on very different lines. I do not mean that Sister changed the least in herself. She was just as sweet and dear as ever, and seemed just as glad to welcome me; but her life was now a very different one, and I knew that I must accept these new conditions with a good grace. Had I not myself helped to bring them about?

And now I come to a day of my life which I shall never forget. It was very nearly bringing to me a terrible sorrow, and it was the means of tearing away from my eyes a veil which had long hung before them, and of quite changing the future for me.

Of course in summer bathing and swimming were very favourite pastimes with us, and particularly with

Digitized by Google

the boys. We had our own bathing-house, and the Lavenders had another; and when we were children we used to be a great deal in the water together.

As we grew up, we girls disported ourselves rather less, but we were all good swimmers and fond of the water. Never a summer passed but we got up races and matches, and one of the favourite feats of the boys was to swim across the harbour, followed by a boat. It was no very wonderful feat for a trained athlete, but it was a pretty good swim for all that. I had done it once or twice in my life, when I was in better practice than of more recent years. We used to start from our bathing-house, and choose a time when the tide was pretty slack; and when we had reached a certain jutting rock close to the opposite shore, it was considered that the feat had been accomplished.

One hot day in July, as I was reading on the lower terrace, Roy came down the steps and remarked that he and Nigel were going to swim across the harbour. Nigel would swim over, Roy following in the boat; after which he would be the swimmer, whilst Nigel took the boat. I said I would watch, and see how they got on. Of course, as the harbour was rather public, complete costumes were always adopted for these excursions.

Well, I sat on the wall and divided my attention between my book and the bobbing head in the water. Nigel swam steadily and strongly out; but of course it took him a considerable time to reach the rock, and my

Digitized by Google

attention often wandered away to other matters. At last, however, I saw him arrive at his goal and clamber into the boat; whereupon in a few minutes Roy took a neat header into the water and struck out for the home shore.

I watched his performance with more interest. This was the first time Roy had attempted the long swim this season. He bathed almost daily, but had not tried any great exercises of strength or prowess. He was considered to be quite strong again, and there was the boat just behind him. I was not the least uncomfortable about him, nor had the smallest fear of accident.

I had dropped my eyes upon the page of my book, after watching Roy for some time. He had, as far as I could see, got about half across, and as he was swimming slowly he would still be some time in reaching our shore. When next I raised my eyes I saw Nigel standing up in the boat paddling furiously with one scull. I looked in vain for Roy's head. It was nowhere to be seen.

Before I could cry out or even formulate a thought, Nigel had taken a header into the water, and had disappeared. I sprang up in a great fright. Something had happened. I rushed along the terrace calling aloud for the men. There were several at work in the gardens, and they came running at my summons. I pointed wildly over the water, and cried in a choking voice,—

Digitized by Google

"Get the boat! get the boat! Something has happened to Lord Lavender and Mr. Royal!"

They dashed down at my words, and were unloosing the boat without loss of a moment. Probably they too had been paying a certain amount of attention to the two swimmers in the harbour, although they had not witnessed Nigel's sudden dive. And I knew he would not have left the boat without serious cause; for of course the wind caught the light sail in a second, and drove it far away from the hapless swimmers.

I strained my eyes over the water. Where—oh where were the boys? Nigel must have been nearly a whole minute under water before he reappeared, and then, to my infinite relief, two heads appeared, but so low in the water that it was terrible to see them. I had very keen, long sight, but it was impossible to see exactly what was passing. I could, however, guess, and my guess, as it afterwards turned out, was a right one. Nigel was floating on his back, supporting himself by vigorous strokes from hand or foot, and he had Roy grasped beneath the shoulders, and was with infinite difficulty keeping his head above water. But how long could it last? how long could it last?

Have you ever watched boats going to the rescue of the drowning? If so, could you ever believe that boats rowed at full speed by men straining every nerve could be so long in reaching their destination? There were three boats now, all making as hard as they could for

Digitized by Google

the struggling swimmers in the middle of the harbour; and yet it seemed to me as I watched that they would never, never arrive.

One approached the floating forms; but the very impetus she had gained carried her right past them, and the clutching hands failed to grasp the drowning men.

Hand over hand came on our men, and I cried aloud in my agony of fear and anxiety. I could not see what they did. The boat shut out the operations of the men; but two out of the three were leaning over the side. Now I saw them hauling something into the boat—something long and inanimate by its look.

One saved; but where was the other? Oh, why did they not bring him out too? I clasped my hands in an agony! What were they doing? I saw one of our men flinging off coat and boots. The next minute he had plunged overboard; and across the water I heard confused shouts and cries.

All the boats were gathered together now. The excitement was spreading over the harbour, and sailing craft with every inch of canvas spread were bearing down upon the spot. My view was impeded by the intervening boats. I could only wring my hands together in mute agony, and try to pray for the safety of those I loved.

Loved! yes, I knew it now. I loved Nigel—I loved him with my whole heart. If he had lost his life

Digitized by Google

saving Roy, I should feel that the light of my eyes had been taken from me.

I knew it in that supreme moment, when I stood there not certain whether he were alive or dead. I knew it then, and it seemed as though I must have been blind not to know it before.

A cheer came ringing over the water. Then they had got them both; but were they living or dead?

Suddenly I knew that there was work for me to do. I sped up the long flights of steps to the house like a hunted hare. Oh how welcome was the sound which greeted my ears as I did so! It was Wuppy's little short, sharp bark of greeting. If he were here—and he came careering along to greet me—Sister was surely here, and she would tell me what to do and what to have ready.

"Little girl, what is the matter?"

I had not seen her—there was a red mist before my eyes—but I heard the tones of her voice, and felt her arms about me.

"O Sister, Sister, tell me what to do! Roy and Nigel have been nearly drowned; they are bringing them here. They must both come here! What shall we want? Tell me! I don't know if they are alive or not, but I think they are. They were not so very, very long under water, though—oh how long it seemed! Tell me what to do!"

In a moment Sister had grasped the situation, and I

Digitized by Google

had rung for the housekeeper, Mary—anybody who could help. One messenger was dispatched for Nurse Lloyd, another for the nearest doctor; but I felt as though Sister were the great stand-by, as I saw her upstairs preparing the beds, asking so quietly and composedly for all that was required, and keeping servants and helpers from any of that aimless flurry which so often renders real work abortive.

I knew that everything within doors was right now, and I dashed down the steps again to order the men to bring both patients here, though I think common sense would have made them do so in any case, since Eagle's Crag was so much farther away, and it would have been no easy matter to transport Nigel there.

The boat was just reaching the steps as I appeared, followed by several other boats full of eager helpers.

Two motionless forms, wrapped in pilot coats and sailcloth, lay in the bottom of the boat.

"Bring them both in!" I said to our head gardener, who was first to look up and see me; "everything is ready in the house."

"Don't ye take on, missie," he said encouragingly; "they edn' dead, not neither of 'em. Get ye to the house, missie; we'll bring 'em up safe and sound."

I felt I had better take this advice, for my head was swimming, and my legs seemed as though they would fail me. I heard the voices of the men calling to each other as I fled upwards; then I remember nothing

Digitized by Google

but a slow, heavy tramping, and the sound of voices passing and repassing. I lay upon the short, hot turf, in a nook out of sight; whilst Wuppy came and poked his nose into my face, and then laid himself down beside me, shivering out of sympathy with the tremors that shook me.

I heard the men go back again to their boats, talking as they went. I heard them talk about "the colonel's lady—a real rare one she be!" I heard them say that the gentlemen would be all right, now that they were in hot beds with sensible women folk to look after them; and then I heard no more, for the tears came to relieve and almost choke me, and until the long weeping had eased my heart I could neither move nor think.

It was Sister who came in search of me at last, with news that both patients were doing well. Roy was in a state which gave cause for a little anxiety, as what had happened to him in the water, so far as could be gathered, was a sudden failure of the heart's action. Nigel had been able to give his account of the matter. The boy had been swimming steadily on, without any sign of distress, when he suddenly disappeared without so much as a sound or gesture of warning. Nigel had seen him rising again, but was so uneasy that he dived after him, and with some difficulty brought him up. But the boat had meantime drifted away, and all he could do was to lie flat in the water supporting him: for being already weary with his swim, and having a

Digitized by Google

pilot coat on, it was hopeless to attempt to reach the shore with such a burden by swimming.

The men testified to coming up to them, and taking Roy from his failing clasp, after which Nigel himself had lost consciousness and sunk, and had had to be rescued by one of our men. Of his own rescue he of course remembered nothing, and was still in a very exhausted state; but he would be all right again after some hours' rest. Roy, she hoped, would be the same; but he would have to be kept quiet for some little time, as the heart's action was very feeble still, and he was not to be aroused to make any sort of exertion for the present.

We sent word to Hilda, who soon came and established herself as Nigel's watcher, and brought encouraging reports as time went on. The doctor when he came said that everything had been done that could be done, and commanded quiet for both his patients, forbidding Nigel to leave his bed for the rest of the day.

Sister stayed with us for several hours, and only left when we were all tranquil and reassured. Roy had been sleeping very quietly, and when he woke he was quite like himself, only a little weak; and before night came we were quite happy about him. Roy was rather delicate, but he had a very sound constitution, which carried him through many ills. He wanted to hear the whole account of his rescue; and after doing so he went to sleep, content in the knowledge that all was well.

Digitized by Google

Two days later, as the evening light was beginning to glow in the sky, I loosed the boat from her moorings, and sailed across the bay, quite by myself, to the creek by The Hermitage.

I knew that I should find Sister alone; for Colonel Clarence had business to-day in Plymouth, and would not be back till late at night.

I found her in the garden, with Wuppy curled up on her knee. He would not come down even to greet me, but only lashed his tail softly from side to side in token of greeting.

I sat down beside Sister, taking the stool at her feet, and I leaned against her knee just in the old way, when I used to come with my small confidences, and when the friendship was new between us.

I told her all the news of the patients—how Nigel had got up yesterday (which she knew, having been across), and how he had gone home this morning; how Roy was to get up to-morrow, and said he felt perfectly well, but had promised mother not to try any long swims or feats of strength again.

Then I was silent, leaning against Sister, my face turned away. I felt her hand upon my head, caressing my hair. She too had been silent some time, but presently she said very softly,—

"Well, little girl?"

I made a sound, something between a laugh and a sob. It roused Wuppy's curiosity; or he felt some-

Digitized by Google

thing electric in the air, for he jumped off Sister's knee, planted his paws upon my shoulders, and examined my face all over with his nose.

I took him round the neck and hid my cheek against his soft, silky coat.

"O Wuppy, you are so curious! you always want to smell out everything, even a secret." Then I put up my hand and drew Sister's down round my neck, as I said in a tremulous whisper,—

"I have promised to marry Nigel!"

THE END.

Digitized by Google

Young Lady's Library.

The Heiress of Wylmington. By EVELYN EVERETT-GREEN, Author of "True to the Last," etc. Crown 8vo, cloth extra, gilt edges. Price 5s. *Cheaper Edition*, 4s.

"There are some remarks in its pages with which sensible people of every creed and every shade of opinion can scarcely fail to sympathize....It is pleasantly and prettily told."—SATURDAY REVIEW.

Temple's Trial; or, For Life or Death. By EVELYN EVERETT-GREEN, Author of "The Heiress of Wylmington," etc. Crown 8vo, cloth extra, gilt edges. Price 5s. *Cheaper Edition*, 4s.

An interesting study of character, going mainly to show the beauty of a quiet, manly Christian life; on the other hand the terrible moral degradation to which selfishness unchecked may lead.

Winning the Victory; or, Di Pennington's Reward. A Tale. By EVELYN EVERETT-GREEN, Author of "The Heiress of Wylmington," etc. Post 8vo, cloth extra. 3s. 6d.

A very interesting tale for young people. The charm of a thoroughly unselfish character is displayed, and in one of an opposite description the idol Self is at last dethroned.

Rinaultrie. By Mrs. MILNE-RAE, Author of "Morag: A Story of Highland Life," etc. Crown 8vo, gilt top. Price 5s. *Cheaper Edition*, 4s.

"We heartily commend this fresh, healthy, and carefully-written tale, with its truthful and vivid pictures of Scottish life."—ABERDEEN FREE PRESS.

On Angels' Wings; or, The Story of Little Violet of Edelsheim. By the Hon. Mrs. GREENE, Author of "The Grey House on the Hill," etc. Crown 8vo, gilt edges. Price 5s. *Cheaper Edition*, 4s.

"Is interesting from the intensity of human feeling and sympathy it develops."—LITERARY WORLD.

Mine Own People. By LOUISA M. GRAY, Author of "Nelly's Teachers," etc. Crown 8vo. Price 5s. *Cheaper Edition*, 4s.

It is a work of great human interest, and all the more is it human because it recognizes the supreme human interest—namely, that of religion, and the strength, purity, and gladness which religion brings to them who receive it in its simplicity and power. A wholesome, suggestive, and wisely-stimulating book for young women.

Nelly's Teachers, and what they Learned. By LOUISA M. GRAY, Author of "Ada and Gerty," etc. Post 8vo, cl. ex., gilt ed. 3s.

A tale for the young. Alice and Lina, while themselves children, trying to teach on Sunday evenings a very young and ignorant child, become learners also in the best sense of the word.

Ada and Gerty; or, Hand in Hand Heavenward. A Story of School Life. By LOUISA M. GRAY, Author of "Dunalton," etc. Post 8vo, cloth extra, gilt edges. 3s.

A touching story of two girls, giving an interesting account of their education and school experiences.

The Children of Abbotsmuir Manse. A Tale for the Young. By LOUISA M. GRAY, Author of "Nelly's Teachers," etc. Post 8vo, cloth extra, gilt edges. 3s.

"This is a book we should like to see in the hands of children. It will help them to be both happy and good."—DAILY REVIEW.

Dunalton. The Story of Jack and his Guardians. By LOUISA M. GRAY, Author of "Nelly's Teachers," "Ada and Gerty," etc. Illustrated. Post 8vo, cloth extra, gilt edges. Price 3s.

"A well-conceived, well-told, and deeply interesting story."—PRESBYTERIAN MESSENGER.

T. NELSON AND SONS, LONDON, EDINBURGH, AND NEW YORK.

Digitized by Google

Library of Historical Tales.

Dorothy Arden. A Story of England and France Two Hundred Years Ago. By J. M. CALLWELL. Crown 8vo, cloth extra. Price 4s.

A story of the dragonnades in France in the time of Louis XIV. Also of the persecutions in England under James II., the Monmouth rebellion, the Bloody Assize, and the Revolution.

How they Kept the Faith. A Tale of the Huguenots of Languedoc. By GRACE RAYMOND. Crown 8vo, cloth extra. Price 4s.

"No finer, more touchingly realistic, and truthfully accurate picture of the Languedoc Huguenots have we met."—ABERDEEN FREE PRESS.

The Lost Ring. A Romance of Scottish History in the Days of King James and Andrew Melville. Crown 8vo, cloth extra. 4s.

"The plot of the romance is skilfully constructed, the dialogue is admirable, and the principal actors in the history are portrayed with great ability."—U.P. MISSIONARY RECORD.

The City and the Castle. A Story of the Reformation in Switzerland. By ANNIE LUCAS, Author of "Leonie," etc. Crown 8vo, cloth extra. Price 4s.

Faithfully portrays the state and character of society at the time of the Reformation (in Switzerland).

Leonie; or, Light out of Darkness: and Within Iron Walls, a Tale of the Siege of Paris. Twin-Stories of the Franco-German War. By ANNIE LUCAS. Crown 8vo, cloth extra. Price 4s.

Two tales, the first connected with the second. One, of country life in France during the war; the other, life within the besieged capital.

Under the Southern Cross. A Tale of the New World. By the Author of "The Spanish Brothers," etc. Crown 8vo, cl. ex. 4s.

A thrilling and fascinating story.

Alison Walsh. A Study of To-Day. By CONSTANCE EVELYN. Crown 8vo, cloth extra. Price 4s.

La Rochelle; or, The Refugees. A Story of the Huguenots. By Mrs. E. C. WILSON. Crown 8vo, cloth extra. Price 4s.

Wenzel's Inheritance; or, Faithful unto Death. A Tale of Bohemia in the Fifteenth Century. By ANNIE LUCAS. Crown 8vo, cloth extra. Price 4s.

Presents a vivid picture of the religious and social condition of Bohemia in the fifteenth century.

Helena's Household. A Tale of Rome in the First Century. With Frontispiece. Crown 8vo, cloth extra. Price 4s.

The Spanish Brothers. A Tale of the Sixteenth Century. By the Author of "The Dark Year of Dundee." Crown 8vo, cloth extra. Price 4s.

The Czar. A Tale of the Time of the First Napoleon. By the Author of "The Spanish Brothers," etc. Crown 8vo, cloth extra. Price 4s.

An interesting tale of the great Franco-Russian war in 1812–13; the characters partly French, partly Russian.

Arthur Erskine's Story. A Tale of the Days of Knox. By the Author of "The Spanish Brothers," etc. Crown 8vo, cloth extra. Price 4s.

The object of the writer of this tale is to portray the life of the people in the days of Knox.

Pendower. A Story of Cornwall in the Reign of Henry the Eighth. By M. FILLEUL. Crown 8vo, cloth extra. Price 4s.

A tale illustrating in fiction that stirring period of English history previous to the Reformation.

T. NELSON AND SONS, LONDON, EDINBURGH, AND NEW YORK.

Digitized by Google

Digitized by Google

Digitized by Google

Digitized by Google

Digitized by Google